

THE
FLAMING
WILDERNESS
RIDGWELL
CULLUM

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CULLUM

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THE FLAMING WILDERNESS



The most thrilling of all Ridgwell Cullum's novels of the Northwest. The story opens with the roar of a forest fire, the splutter and crackling of burning wood, and the driving wind that carried a withering heat over the wilderness. Jink had set out to reach the one thing in the world he loved, his boy Nick. But now Jink was no longer alive; all the life that survived the blazing forest was the inert body of the boy. So Grant and Hester raised Nick, this half-breed son of a cattle-thief, and gave him everything their own daughter, Billee, received. When he grew up Nick found he had more than a brotherly love for Billee and that she was now the one thing he wanted out of life. But all Billee's love was centered in Roddy, her childhood sweetheart, and Nick hated him for it. The struggle between these men will send satisfying thrills through every reader.

RIDGWELL CULLUM

THE FLAMING WILDERNESS

THE BULL MOOSE

THE TREASURE OF BIG WATERS

THE TIGER OF CLOUD RIVER

THE MYSTERY OF THE BARREN LANDS

THE WOLF PACK

THE FLAMING WILDERNESS

RIDGWELL CULLUM



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P A R T I
Cattle Days

The Story here set out is entirely a work of imagination. It has been written for no other purpose than that of entertainment. It contains no portraiture of any person or persons, living or dead. Neither does it contain any representation of any business organization that has ever existed.

THE AUTHOR

CHAPTER I

Fading Glory

THERE WERE SILENT MOMENTS

while the man's narrowed eyes searched the distance beyond the shelter of the ranchhouse porch. They were observing the lengthening shadows stealing over the soft-hued, luxuriant sea of blue grass. There was hot passion behind them. There was the resentment of a man of strong emotions. His face had an impish caste. But its expression of humour had no power to disguise the smouldering volcano of his feelings.

"Look at it, Gran!" He flung a hand and pointed. "Get a good look while it's still there. It surely is worth it. It's piled us dollars. You and me. Piled us enough to pack the darn vaults of a city bank. God Almighty sowed it feed for His fool cattle. And it's left to man's cussedness to turn it in so he can fatten his belly right with the wheat he raises. Blue grass! The world's wonder feed. And it's finished. Hell!"

It came with a rush, hotly. And it ended with a wide gesture of two hopeless hands whose arms were bared to the roll of Benny Hyles' thin cotton shirt sleeves.

His movement brought one of his hands into contact with a glass brimming with rye whisky and water. It was standing on the table between him and his companion. The contact remained. And he drank with conviction.

Grant Wilford, big and raw, with the bronzed, clean-shaven, calm face of a man whose emotions are at all times within his control, bestirred a sprawled body in the depths of a rocker chair. His out-flung limbs drew up on the boarded floor of the porch. He removed a well-charred pipe from a capacious mouth. He pursed his lips and spat with accuracy into an adjacent cuspidor.

"Sure," he drawled, with an approving nod. "Hell!"

He continued to smoke in placid contentment while there followed a silence of real companionship.

The blue-grass bottom, which was the valley of Blacktail River, rich, succulent, and warmly grey-green in the evening light, to these two men of the cattle world was like the precious outcrop of a quartz reef to the gold prospector. There were thousands of acres of rich grazing stretching away on either side of a meandering river whose banks were without a tree. The widely flung uplands of the slopes which sheltered the valley were garmented densely with foothill woodlands of spruce and jackpine, and all the legions of Western Canada's mountain forests. And, falling back as the vista widened, their purpling shadows added to the pastoral beauty of it all.

With their day's work behind them, and a westering sun gleaming on the far off glacial field which was the glittering roof of the still impregnable citadel of the Rocky Mountains, it was a time when frank humanity was very apt to break through the hard exterior with which these men faced the labours of their life.

It was all remote. The greater Foothills was a world to itself, apart. The din of civilization's onward press was no more than a faint murmur where ears were tuned to the great silences. But, in spite of primordial forests stirred only by Nature sounds, in spite of mountain torrents whose creatures knew no fear of gaff and fly, in spite of fastnesses whose solitudes have remained undisturbed since the beginnings of time, there was no escape from the reactions of man's vital activities.

The valley of the Blacktail was the home setting which, eighteen years earlier, Grant Wilford had branded his "Lazy S." He had claimed it and registered his brand in his days of ardent youth and reckless courage. It was in the boom days of cattle traffic. Those days when the world, for the moment, looked to Canada's western prairies for its supplies of flesh.

Then Grant's possessions had been few enough. His stock had been no more than twenty odd cows of doubtful quality. And a bull whose antecedents supplied no record. His financial resources had been no more than a liquid thousand dollars and a heavy mortgage. But he had possessed the priceless asset of a girl wife whose courage and devotion far outran her business calculation. And she had supplied a perfect mating for her man's vital energies.

He, and his neighbour and lifelong friend, the hot-blooded, hot-headed Kentuckian, Benny Hyles, had started up in friendly rivalry within a year of each other. Blue grass to Benny was a dream that never failed to carry him back to those early days of childhood in his father's Southern home. And his discovery of "Valley Deep" higher up in the hills, and within hail of his friend, had put his future beyond all question.

Now both were rich and prosperous ranchers who counted their hoofs in thousands, and their dollars in tens of thousands. They owned lavish, if primitive, home places. They were counted leaders in their traffic with cattle brands already become historic. In some eighteen years they had achieved all that which strong resolution and a stern fighting spirit may achieve in a world catering for the vital needs of humanity's body. And they had no intention of yielding weakly all that for which they had so ardently striven.

Benny Hyles had just ridden out from Calford, where he had awakened to a shock of news which had completely overshadowed his golden outlook. He had learned that boom trade leaves a man forgetful, or at least careless, of his defences. He had learned that a world a-clamour will not be denied. That progress is a tide which flows on. And that man must swim with it or perish. He had learned that the famous "Lazy S." and his own "V.D." were still cattle brands of repute. But they were spoken with a shrug as of things that have been but are no longer.

Here at a moment when their corrals were about to flood

with spring-bred stock ready for the searing iron, the great cattle market of Calford had revolted. The whole of the western prairie world was rapidly going over to grain. Buyers in quest of fat stock were no longer looking to Calford. The reign of cattle was clearly over. And the future of a prosperous ranching city would entirely depend upon its ability to adapt itself to circumstances.

Benny had imparted his news with all that vehemence to which the less emotional Grant was well enough accustomed in his friend. Shrewd, explosive, Benny was never easy. And now he was full of bitter grievance.

The table between them was laden with alcoholic hospitality. Already it had done its share in their discursive labours. Benny's impish features reflected its beneficence. And Grant knew that steady mellowing which affords so much mental comfort.

"That hunch for laying down a plant of race-track stock was a right one, and I guess we were looking farther than we knew," Benny reflected after awhile. "I'd surely say the trail was right. But it don't get us over the hill-top. A fifty thousand dollar stock of racing blood don't match up to a range of beeves running on the hoof."

He reluctantly relinquished a glass whose content had been reduced by half. His weathered forehead creased under heavy thought. He shook his head.

"You can't stem an ocean with a bum top-rail fence," he gloomed.

Grant's placidity found expression in a slowly drawled "Ye-ah." Then he elaborated.

"That's so, I guess. Old man Canute didn't amount to a shuck when the tide set. Seems like an avalanche has rolled down with you an' me under the bottom of it."

The calm of it reacted on Benny's temper.

"Gosh dang!" he snarled, with a thump on the table that clattered the glasses. "Wake to it, Gran! There it is! See?" He pointed. "Shadow bogeys creeping and blotting

it all out. Can't stop 'em. Longer and darker. In a while—nothing. Glory! Big noise! You with your 'Lazy S.' branded on thousands! Me with my 'V.D.'! They're fading right out under those crawling shadows. And, in a while, you won't find one of 'em from here to Winnipeg. Hark to the racket of 'em down there in your corrals. They're chawing their night feed. You won't hear that again. Only the bark of a mangy coyote. And the yowl of a hungry-gutted timber wolf. Do we stand for the folk who reckon Gran Wilford and Benny Hyles ain't better than the suckers who take the first knock? Not on your sweet life! I could cry like a snivelling kid."

Benny sat up erect in the stout wicker chair that usually supported the gracious comeliness of the hostess of the "Lazy S." He frowned alcoholically instead of emulating any "snivelling kid."

"Do we set around figuring?" he barked on harshly. "Do we look on while the whole darn prairie pulls those plums? No, sir. We got two hind legs each. And we're standing on them. We'll pull plum for plum with those sharps. And we'll match their ante, and see the game. Wheat's the sort of junk I want to feed to hogs an' gophers. Sure. And you decoratin' the iron saddle of a binder looks like the picture that's going to pass me a most ridiculous laff. But I'm going to get that laff, Gran. And you're going to get a crop of hard-shell corns where your pants set pretty. I'm hitting back to Calford this night to buy a machine man."

One of Grant Wilford's big hands reached for his glass. His smile had tolerant geniality.

"Nervous, ain't you, Benny?" he soothed, in his slow way. "Best sleep the night right here. Hester 'll fix your bunk for you. The machine man's due along noon tomorrow. He's not the sort to squeal if you buy his whole blame schedule, I guess."

There was alcohol in Benny's stare of amazement. There

was also profound impression. His feelings stirred him to abrupt activity. He snatched a cigar from his vest pocket, stabbed its bitten end in the corner of a mouth that snapped shut. And he chewed it mercilessly.

"Christ!" he exploded. "How d'you do it, Gran?"

Grant solemnly replenished his glass.

"Sales down by ten thousand dollars since last fall round-up," he drawled.

"I'm going to kill something!" Benny muttered savagely. "Guess it'll have to be Jink Woodley or some other lousy scab of a hill rustler. The whole darn world wouldn't come amiss."

Grant nodded sympathetically.

"Sure," he agreed.

"It means work, Gran," Benny deplored grievously. "Work! The sort of work makes you feel like a garbage-raker when he hears about it. Yes. I'll have to kill that bum tough, Jink Woodley! Live Oak's seen him piking around our brood mares."

He lit what remained of his cigar, thoughtfully.

"But it's hell, Gran," he warned with portentous solemnity. "We're just shooting hot air. That's all. We're hurt. Hurt where it hurts most. Both of us. And we ain't taking hurt without a hell of a kick. Cattle's God A'mighty's creatures. The best He ever fixed alive. And you and me have grown alive with them. We guessed no grain proposition could touch us in these hills that's full of blue-grass. We've sat around with the laff on the prairie sharps. And now we've quit that laff. It's those Dagos 'way down south. We never counted the Argentinos. It ain't the grain they're raising from here to Winnipeg. It's the Dagos. That's the flood that's washed us out. And I saw it last fall when I took that trip. You see, they've got it all. Grass the world's limit. Breeds to work it that'll stand to live on a corn shuck. And a winter that couldn't grow forty below if you drowned the sun with snow water. Millions of hoofs on the run."

He gestured, cutting a flattened hand across over the table.

"Lazy S.? V.D.? Defunct. R.I.P. We'll go buy plug hats and weepers. And we'll say Amen to the world's best traffic and a man's job."

"Yeah!"

It sighed reflectively on the still evening air.

Grant was gazing westward where the last of the sunset glow was fading, and an odd star or two was twinkling derisively. It was at a steep uplift. A saddle linking twin hills that were densely wooded. The opening between the hill tops was narrow. And the sunset was still pouring through it. It was a time-made trail that passed on over to Benny's Valley Deep.

Two horsemen had just appeared in the forest opening with the sunset shining behind them.

Grant pointed the stem of his pipe.

"Live Oak!" he said. And his eyes had narrowed. "Your kid boy, Roddy, with him. Riding like there's something behind 'em. And it's—ugly."

The hospitality of the Lazy S. was forgotten. The two men were standing. And they were regarding the figures on two hard-blowing horses that were pure blood stock. Grant was leaning. A roof-support assured his bodily security at the edge of the high-built porch. Benny stood at the porch's extreme edge as steadily as though no liquor had ever passed his lips.

They had been joined by Hester Wilford, a plumpish figure in a costly frock whose colour illuminated a scene of grim manhood. Beside her, and clinging to her hand, was a fairy-like child of six, all big, deep violet eyes and a mass of red-gold hair. The little thing's eyes grew bigger and bigger as she listened to a harsh story flung with force and savage passion.

It was Live Oak Dannell, Benny's foreman. A creature

of lean, hard-worn body, and whose horizon never reached much further than the top rail of his branding pinch. He was the sort of hard-case old-timer who packed most of his argument in holsters built to contain seven chambers. An argument ready at all times on the least provocation. But he was talking now like the flood of the Blacktail's spring freshet.

"Five of 'em, boss," he cried savagely. "And he's clear away with 'em. It's the thing I sed away back. An' you jest laffed the same as if I was crazy. An' Copper Jade's with 'em."

He drew a deep breath as he leant over the horn of his saddle.

"Say, boss," he went on. "She's carryin' a get by Kentucky Kid that's cost you two thousand dollars. Guess you know that, sure I told you Jink Woodley was pikin' around. Well, he's jumped right in on us an' I'm out for him till the birds have cleaned up the dirt of his lousy carcass. The boys are out right now. An' me an' Roddy boy has rode over to collect a bunch from here. It's a hot trail fer a hanging'-bee. It's the Gawd A'mighty chanct I've been yearnin' quite awhiles. If I get the boys from here we don't need a thing else but the rope I got to my saddle. Copper Jade! The greatest filly ever foaled."

The man's sunken eyes showed white all round their rolling pupils. The stubble of unshaven whisker and lank black hair helped an impression of savagery. There was not one listening to him but knew that the devil in Live Oak was an ugly thing to rouse.

Benny's square body was vibrant enough in its reaction to a war cry to which his own Southern soul so readily responded. But it took a woman to anticipate.

"There's going to no hanging-bee with the boys from the Lazy S. sitting in at it, Live Oak," Hester Wilford said with the swift, sharp decision to which the men who knew her were accustomed. "This is a white territory where there's police and law. Cut out the hot stuff. And

get a hunch. The boys are at the bunk house. And you can get them all to get Benny's mares back. But only on promise you leave Jink, or whoever it is, to the Calford Police. Best leave that rope here for Billee to skip with."

Grant bestirred from his leaning.

"That goes," he drawled in his slow fashion.

Hester nodded her thanks to the man who was her partner. Benny stared round from one to the other. Then his eyes shone with a questioning smile as he regarded his twelve year old son leaning forward over the horn of his saddle.

"No use, Roddy," he chuckled whimsically. "They won't stand for the man's way where they grow their red coats. But maybe Auntie Hester's right though. It's the fillies we want back. And I guess we'll pass her an honour promise. Pass that rope down to Billee as a souvenir of old Kentucky, Live Oak," he went on, turning to the cattleman whose furious temper threatened a break.

Then of a sudden all smiling passed out of Benny's manner.

"You heard, Live Oak!" he snapped, as the foreman sat his saddle unmoving.

It was a hot moment. It was a moment of threat. Grant lounged again. But he was ready. The fair-haired Roddy, suntanned and largely mature for his years, was almost in open rebellion. Benny had but one desire where horse and cattle rustlers were concerned. And Live Oak? His nickname told all that was needed. He was the true type killer of an older school.

Reluctantly the foreman's tenacious fingers struggled with the rawhide knotting that held his coiled rope secure to his saddle horn. There was a moment or two of straining silence. Then the coil flung viciously on the flooring of the porch.

"Thank you, Live Oak."

Hester's comely face smiled a nod in which there was nothing but gratitude.

"I shan't forget. Go and get all the boys that'll turn out to help you. And the best of luck."

Grant bestirred. There was a hard light in his eyes as he stood up from his post.

"We'll get down to the barn and throw a couple saddles on, Benny," he said. "You'll need a fresh plug."

CHAPTER II

The Outcast

JINK WOODLEY WAS BORN OF a white father and a Sioux Indian mother. He was a half-breed from across the United States Border. And he had been abandoned by his parents in his earliest babyhood that they might flee from the consequences of homicidal enterprise.

His upbringing had been within the precincts of an "Institution" where the common correctional spirit of such places duly obtained. He had known no warm human sympathy. He had just been a small atom of human flotsam tossed upon the frigid waters of an arctic sea of sanctimonious charity. His later teens found him released from the repressions of charity's bondage. And, like his father, a full-fledged and hunted "killer."

His burrow was on the remote shores of a romantic mountain tarn suspended high up in the Canadian Rockies. It was a lake that was unnamed, unmapped. And, it repos'd, a vast Nature-built reservoir, pouring its surplus waters into the channel of the Blacktail River. It was not the actual source of the Blacktail. That was still higher up, somewhere lost amongst the eternal snows.

It was raw, desolate, but secure. Gorgeous and gloomy, the great lake was shadowed by primordial forests which must have started growth when the world began. It was a remote niche. A cleft in mighty hills. An eyrie admirably designed for such a bird of prey as the cattle thief.

Only a creature of Jink's casehardened temperament could have faced a world so tremendous, so storm-driven, so profoundly hushed and alone. Its forests were like the aisles of the night. Its muskegs were a miry terror. Its tor-

rents were aflood with raging menace. It was an outer darkness in a world of spiritual light where man is driven to peering across his shoulder seeking those horrors which are without existence.

But Jink's sanity was iron-proofed. That which might be sought for across his shoulder was without interest for him. He was essentially a cold-minded realist who saw nothing in the light of imagination.

On the contrary, Jink revelled in pastimes he found ready to his hand and mood. On the wide waters of his lake he paddled a birch-bark kyak of his own fashioning. And he fished the sweet food that stirred his appetite. He trapped and shot pelts for the use of the woman and child who shared his exile. Then he hunted bigger game with all the hot enthusiasm which was his heritage from the days when buffalo, in countless legions, roamed the rich prairies.

The real business of his life, however, was prosecuted with inflexible determination and evil. From the outset he had declared war upon Calford's cattle-world. And he saw to it that his one-man effort against the forces of law and order knew no relaxing.

Days and weeks, and even months, found him absent from his stronghold. And his return to it was rarely enough empty-handed. The man unquestionably had genius. For his method had that care for detail which made him complete his whole transaction far from his mountain home, and only return with his work translated into a cash result, or the things his cash could purchase for him. A search of his eyrie would have found no betraying loot.

For nine years Jink Woodley had scoured the prairies and foothills with complete impunity and halfbreed cunning. He was an elusive, threatening shadow, appearing and disappearing as though a creature of no actuality. And there seemed to be no snare of human fashioning to trap him.

The woman who had accompanied him, to share his

fortunes and his sexual life, was a creature of white blood and loose morals who duly fulfilled her mission. Marie served him as he desired for three of his nine years. The servant of his home and his every whim. And in her service she fired the only spark of humanity the man's perverted soul possessed. She bred him his son.

In all probability it was this maternal effort which became the woman's marital salvation. It certainly forged a powerful link between her and her man. Where, hitherto, Jink had regarded this white woman as a mere chattel, now she became a necessity in his life. And she would remain that necessity for just so long as the babe, Nick, required a mother.

But Marie was without Jink's proof against the desolation of the world about her. In the hush of Nature she found all those horrors which have no existence. She was a victim of all the soft, yielding weakness of her type. And when, at last, in the third year of young Nick's life, she finally closed her eyes upon a nightmare of life, Jink yielded to blasphemy but otherwise remained unmoved.

The man's reaction, however, was different from that which might have been anticipated. He did not casually dump his dead out of sight under the forest soil. He did not weight it and sink it in the frigid waters of his lake. Marie had given him his son. Had served him to the limits of her womanhood. So, at great pains, he buried her on the big central island of his lake, where a single lone pine stood monument to mark a stout mausoleum in the form of a log hut which he built over her. It was a hut without window, but with a heavy door of split logs. And it was amply proof against marauding scavengers.

After Marie's passing young Nick progressed in response to the unskilled care of his father. And the spark which the woman had fired in the man flamed into a passionate blaze. The cold killer saw nothing in the wide world beyond his child.

On his ninth birthday Nick's growth was well beyond

his years. He had his mother's slimness of body, with the dusky skin and fineness of Indian feature belonging to his father's ancestry. He had learned with amazing quickness. He rode his buckskin cayuse from the moment his small legs could straddle its razor back. He came to paddle the kyak on the lake. And he learned to fish with the skill of any Indian child.

The dark forest world so gloomily mysterious, the storming or peaceful waters of the shadowed lake, the crags and valleys so thrilling with romance to his child mind, were all things forming a glorious background of alluring appeal. Then there were those creatures of the wilderness who were either friends or enemies.

But supreme in Nick's life was his unlovely father. His mother had passed with his infant needs. She had become a sort of spirit creature hovering in a confused haze of child memory. The other was his hero.

Jink taught the boy to fend for himself during his own long, imperative absences. And the results were staggering in their wonder. At nine the boy was a young savage in his attitude to the life about him. He lived in the manner of the savage forbears of whom he knew nothing. And he went to sleep in his blankets and furs, alone at night, without a shadow of fear of those grim Nature stirrings which transformed the darkness with their ghostliness.

Only winter had the least effect upon his child mind. When winter storms raged and blizzard howled down off the world of glaciers; when the cold drove through his heavy furs and ate into his young flesh; when the starving wolves ringed about the forest clearing of his home, and gleaming eyes peered, two and two, at the blaze of defensive camp-fire, then did the boy know a shadow of disquiet. But even then a nod, a word, even a flicker of a smile in Jink's cold black eyes was all-sufficient to uplift.

• • • • •

Nick had been alone for three days. But he was more

than usually happy. This fourth day was his birthday. And his father had promised return at nightfall.

But this occasion of his father's absence was different. It was a special visit to those places which young Nick had only heard of at night over their camp-fire. It was a journey on Nick's behalf. When his father returned he would bring him a birthday gift. A real, live racehorse for his riding! A wonderful sorrel mare in place of his old, loping, buckskin cayuse.

The boy's eager mind was full of the supreme wonder of it.

Copper Jade! The name haunted. She came from Kentucky. A place where they ran a wonderful race called the Kentucky Derby. Someone had paid thousands of dollars for her. Thousands! And she could run like the winds that blew down off the ice in winter. His! She was to be his!

He was in a semi-nude state squatting on the door sill of his home, watching the swirl of smoke from the campfire which always burned before it. A bleak wind was driving down into the clearing out of a sky grey with scudding cloud. There was no sun. No warmth but that of his fire. But such matters were unheeded. Nick was completely held by the vision his father had described.

He was gazing at a beautiful crested neck. He saw a small head with wide full eyes, and small ears that pricked instead of flapping to its gait like those of his cayuse. He saw a round barrel, and full, stout ribs that shone like burnished gold in the sunshine.

Nick wanted to laugh out loud. He would have sung had he known any melody at all. He felt as if he must go out into the forest and shout his wonderful news to friends and enemies alike. Nightfall looked to be months ahead.

But habit was strong in the boy. His obedience to the claims of his mountain life was part of him. He sprang up, dashed across to his wood stack and replenished his fire instead of proclaiming his joy. Then, kicking its embers

together with the calloused sole of one bare foot, he stood considering the upward rush of sparks and flame.

Tall and slim for his years, with muscles already hardened, he had lost the last vestige of the roundness of baby flesh. His were the sharp angles of a conditioning and promising colt. His garments were only two. The bunched wad of the upper part of his father's breeches which had been cut off just below the crotch, strapped about his slim loins. And above that was the dirty tatter of a thin cotton shirt. For the rest he wore no covering of any sort except that which the wind and sun had stained upon his young flesh.

He raked an uncombed mass of raven hair with unclean fingers. And his sloe-black eyes, bright with eager intelligence, searched the shadowed woods crowding about him. He was a picture of childhood's tatterdemalion.

It was the urge to do. He must find that which would rid him of the weary time of waiting. Nightfall! There were long hours yet. Morning, noon, and an interminable sundown. What?

His traps! Yes. That was it. There were dozens of snares set far and wide in the forests. He would take his food, his cayuse, and spend his day with them. Besides, who could tell? There might be a jack-rabbit in one of them. His father liked jack-rabbit for his supper. So did he.

• • • • •

The boy's dark eyes were narrowed against the drive of the wind whining down off the snows that never melted. He was thinking about them now as he gazed. He was thinking in his simple way, and wondering.

They had been there as long as he could remember. They had always been there. And the shifting clouds that covered the hill tops like a fog, too. They just came and went and played about. In his eager groping mind Nick asked himself why?

He shifted, bracing himself more firmly against the growing force of the wind. And he turned his gaze from the distant mountain tops to that which lay beyond the abyss below him.

Suddenly he cocked an alert eye skywards. And it remained regarding the grey scud of cloud.

It was a wide rocky ledge set far up on the hillside. Behind him was a mantle of forest. It came up in a dark sweep from far below. And it went on up to the imaginary line beyond which its growth was no longer possible.

The ledge thrust out baldly from the forest line. It was barren of all save an attenuated growth of mountain weed grass which was sunscorched to the condition of rank hay.

Nick's cayuse was foraging amongst the weeds at the forest edge. Its saddle cinchas had been eased. And the snaffle had been removed from its calloused mouth. A camp-fire had been lit. And the wind was drifting its smoke, scenting the air with the resin of burning pine cones and deadwood collected from the forest.

The boy was camped for his food at his most favoured camping ground, high up and overlooking an awesome gorge that fell away to the bowels of the mountain world more than fifteen hundred feet below him.

He was standing at the extreme edge of the abyss of it. He was standing there unconscious of any risk. All he knew was he liked the wind that buffeted him. He liked just looking. And just a childish conceit told him that he was emulating the golden-crested monarch of the air whose kingdom he had invaded.

His lifted gaze remained on a tiny speck against the grey clouds. It was infinitesimal, moving, sailing. Shape and outline were too far for him to discover. But he knew. It was that monarch he loved to emulate. It was planing down with outspread, unmoving wings. And the direction of its rapid descent was precisely where he was standing.

Realization of the bird's objective stirred the boy to urgent interest. He looked round at his fire and saw its

small, hot, flaming heart. But its smoke was a thin stream scattered into nothingness by the force of the wind. He bestirred at once.

His bare feet padded lightly across to the forest edge where was his collected store of fuel. And he forthwith heaped the lot to augment his defence. In an instant an acrid smoke was belching.

One more glance upwards reassured the boy. The winged peril had veered its course. It was no longer planing a descent. Its vast wing-spread was slowly oscillating. It was heading westward for those snows which never melted.

Nick squatted Indian fashion over his fire. He groped in his grub sack and gave himself up to his food and his dreaming of the wonderful racehorse which was so soon to be his.

But the boy's dreaming found rude interruption. It was an ominous sound. He was gnawing hard, ash-cooked bread, and his jaws were busy when a rush of sound, like a wind gust amongst the tree-tops, came. It suggested speed. It suggested size. And he jolted round.

His vision was a mere flash. It came and was gone almost before he realized. But he saw. In that flash he discovered the full of its magnificence.

It was a gorgeous bird of almost incredible size. Its wing-spread was monstrous. Its brilliantly feathered neck was stretched low. Its savage, hooked beak was threatening. Its claws were wide open, as though about to alight. And their scaled digits were slashing talons. It swept over him at a height of less than twenty feet. And he felt the air rush of its beating wings.

Nick cowered down. It was unconscious but instinctive. It was not fear. Just the staggering of surprise. And he was up again on the instant as the regal savage met the full of his fire's smoke stream and hurtled on in panic.

Nick went on eating as though nothing had occurred to disturb.

His meal reached its normal conclusion. And he stood

up to spread and beat out his friendly fire. But before he had rolled his sack to set it on his saddle he knew a fresh set-back. It was the wild panic of his cayuse.

The pony leapt. Its head was flung up. Terror flamed in distended eyes. And there was the sickening sound of a squeal. Its shy carried the little buckskin to the very verge of the abyss, where it stood shaking in pitiful terror.

The pony was facing the line of the forest. Peering into the woods Nick saw them. And he stooped and grabbed a brand from his fire and raced in amongst the trees.

Wolves! Just fool timber wolves, hungry, scenting, and eager for the flesh of his little friend. He would show them! Nearly a dozen of them. There they were, mangy, summer-coated, currish creatures with tuckered flanks and slavering jaws. All his boy's contempt was flung with the brand of fire he hurled amongst the insolent beasts.

But the wolves only scattered, and then re-gathered.

Nick was without a moment's hesitation. A livid rage, the cold fury which he inherited from his father, leapt at once. He ran back to his fire. And he picked up two big flaming brands. He charged right down on the waiting wolves and flung his fire into their midst.

This time he had his way. The wolves broke and fled. And he watched them vanish into the far shadows.

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The cayuse was ambling home over the soft soil of the flat shore of the lake. Nick was exulting. He had found every trap empty and unsprung. But it did not matter. In awhile he would be eating his supper with Jink. And Copper Jade would be eating hers with his little buckskin.

The pony was homeward bound and pulling. Nick saw no reason for checking it, for the sun was setting, and his hours of waiting were nearly over. So they came abreast of the sprawling island away out on the lake.

Young Nick could never pass the solemn sentry pine without a stir of feeling. And so it was now. He saw it

sharply outlined against the evening sky, and the vision of it depressed. He dropped his gaze to the low scrub in search of that other. It was there. It was always there. A low pitched roof of logs. And he wondered, in his child's way, why his mother had been taken away from him.

It was just as he dashed a grimy hand across his eyes that he became aware of the amazing change. It was absurd, because he knew he was not crying. But the tree was all misty. There was a mist sweeping over the ruffled waters of the lake. And even as he gazed the whole island was losing itself in fog.

Nick stared incredulously. To make quite sure he again dashed a hand across his eyes. Then he sniffed.

Suddenly his pony was jerked almost on to its haunches. Nick flung round in his saddle and gazed up into the wind, the way he had come. Instantly he found what he sought. That which had inspired his sudden panic.

It was rolling down on the wind from the gorge from which he had just emerged. Vast grey billows rolling over and over in the evening light, a wild, churning, avalanche of blinding smoke! Even as he looked, the gorge, with its forests and towering cliffs, became submerged. And the lake shore was blotted out.

The forest! The forest behind him was afire! And the wind was driving it down on his home!

In that moment of horror Nick remembered. His mind leapt back to the wolves. To the fire brands. To the dust dry pine cones which underlaid the forest. He had fired the forest!

A choking sound broke from the child's throat. It came again and again. For the first time in his life Nick discovered—terror. And, in the hideous panic of it, two bare heels clamped against his pony's tuckered flanks, and racing hoofs spurned the soft soil beneath them.

CHAPTER III

The Wilderness Aflame

THERE WAS A SCOWL IN THE man's black eyes. And he slouched in a saddle that had the lightness of little more than its frame. Jink Woodley cut his equipment to the lightest for obvious reasons.

His horse was a pinto. It was a sound beast, lean, raking, and with a stride that was free and sure. It lapped up the miles on a minimum of forage, and with scarcely a sweat streak about its shoulders and flanks. To a lover of beauty the pinto was no more blest than its rider. They made a hard-case team.

Jink had five mares collared together with neck-ropes. And the one nearest him was a rich red-copper sorrel. She was just showing signs of foal. And her beautiful coat was rough from weeks at pasture. But, to the understanding, her beauty was quite remarkable.

Copper Jade was the most treasured creature on the ranges of Benny Hyles. So treasured, in fact, that no searing brand had ever been permitted to mar her coat. She was without blaze, star, or sock. From the tips of her dainty ears to the last hair of her flowing tail she was an unblemished aristocrat.

She was the big prize the cattle thief had cast for and caught. The other fillies were just the sort of loot his greed could not resist. They, too, were bloodstock. They, too, were of the race track. But Copper Jade was a creature apart.

Jink's scowl was an expression of discontent with himself. As his narrowed black eyes flashed this way and that over the hill country he asked himself why hadn't he had sense enough to leave the other fillies alone? What, in

God A'mighty's name, had made him quit the game the way he'd always played it? Why was he making home with unnecessary stolen stock, and asking for trouble? Crazy! Plumb crazy!

But he made no attempt to rid himself of the fillies. And it was the greed in him that kept them with him to delay his journey home.

They were climbing out of a muskeg bottom to the lift of a spruce-clad hill. The hills, deeply wooded, with bald crowns, rose about him in every direction. A perfect maze of them. But the way of it was perfectly familiar. One of the many routes by which Jink eluded pursuit.

Jink considered the sky which was sullen with wind-driven cloud. He knew the time without the possession of a timepiece. The afternoon was wearing on. And he calculated he would make good his promise to his boy.

He reached over with a long thin switch and urged the fillies out of their hang-back. There was a forward spring by all, and the pinto quickened its own gait in response.

They were nearing the hill crest beyond which lay a long descent to a wide valley of blue-grass. It was there the halfbreed meant to take a brief off-saddle. There was water there, and good feed. And the fillies had made forty miles since moon-up the night before.

Before his silhouette could cut the skyline at the hill-top, however, Jink drew rein. He turned about in his saddle, peering back over his tracks into the far distance. It was an expression of the real man, the cattle thief. His dark eyes were keenly searching for any sign of pursuit.

The man's scowl still remained. But now it had a different meaning. It was the intentness of his search. Seated there on the back of his drooping horse, with the stolen fillies roped to his saddle horn, he made a striking picture against a wild background. With a dusky skin burnt to the hue of walnut he looked far more than half Indian. Then there was that in the poise of his slim body, and the expression of a lean, almost cadaverous face,

which was full of capacity and insolence. He seemed to be challenging the pursuit for which he was searching.

He could discover no sign of any pursuit. There was just an empty sea of forest-swept hills. The whole world about him was given over to the raw of Nature. So far as he could judge there was nothing else. His leather chaps, with his gun holsters strapped down the legs of them, creaked as he turned back to face the rise ahead of him. He lifted his reins.

Jink had no intention of silhouetting for a moment longer than it would take to pass the hill crest. But he was caught up in a wholly unexpected fashion. Almost unconscious of his own action he reined up again at the very summit, and sat staring incredulously ahead of him at the distant hills. Some fifteen miles on, deep in the heart of that broken country, his secret home was securely hidden. And just beyond it, just behind where he knew his boy to be awaiting his return, he could see a heavily lifting pall of—smoke!

Fire! Forest fire!

So far as he knew there was no living human soul out there but his boy. Then how? Why? There had not been a thunder storm in the region for many days. How then came it that the forest above his home was fired?

He watched the rapid increase of the volume and spread of smoke. It seemed to grow with every moment. And the sight brought him swift decision. There would be no off-saddle in the blue-grass valley. Water—yes. But—

He lifted his reins. And a disquieted father beat his fillies into a rapid descent to the water below.

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After watering, Jink urged on. A mile farther was the lift out of the rich valley, and he hurried to its highest point. It was a high hill clad with a low scrub. And it gave him the view he required. He drew rein at its summit regardless of any silhouette.

The area of fire had spread widely. And the wind was driving it headlong. Even as Jink watched he became aware of an added, and infallible portent. A herd of blacktail deer, headed by a splendid nine-pointer, charged from the woods below him, and raced across the grassy bottom. They came from the western hills. And their flight was eastwards. They flashed away with their antlers flat. And their passing was of creatures hunted.

Jink had seen enough. There was just one thing in life that could penetrate to his casehardened soul and turn his heart's blood to water. There was just one creature in the world of greater concern for him than Jink Woodley. It was Nick. The child, Nick, whom he had raised to cleanliness and honesty in an isolation where the world's foulness, he believed, could not touch him. Nick was out there alone, waiting for his return on his birthday. And a forest fire was driving down upon him out of the greater hills to the westward.

The cattle thief knew a fear which nothing else in his life could have shown him. His boy! The one little creature of his own creation! He looked to be in dire peril. Jink knew how bright was the lad's intelligence. Jewel-bright. He knew his readiness in the Nature chances about him. But Nick, in his brief nine years, had never known the forest afire. He had never witnessed its devastating fury. He had never seen the forest creatures, all the warring elements of animal creation, racing cheek by jowl with no thought but to escape from the devouring terror pursuing them.

Escape? God Almighty! What hope could the kid have if he did not understand?

The man's action was instant.

Birthday gift! Copper Jade! They suddenly became unmeaning. The led fillies. A ridiculous hindrance only. Jink cast off the lead rope from the horn of his saddle, herded the lot back into the valley where was feed and water, and left them just as they were tied. Then his

savage spurs slashed his pinto's ribs. And he rode on with all the legs the creature could show him.

The steep descent was without "prop" or faulting. The deep, soft bottom with its crowding woods was only a race track upon which to stretch the horse's limbs and expand lungs with the capacity of bellows. The far ascent was just something to be dismissed under a devouring stride. With its big, lazy ears laid back with a suggestion of mulish obstinacy, with its fiddle head and wall-eyes boring low to the ground, with its action low and distance-devouring the pinto's appetite for mileage was that of the gluton.

But that was the way of it. Jink was not the man to give anything away. And when he staked his fortunes on the capacity of his pinto he knew precisely what he was doing. When he called for the limit the limit was always his.

It was all the familiar world Jink knew by heart. Fifteen miles or so of hill, and valley, and forest. Of muskeg, and ambling summer stream. Of valleys of grass which had remained ungrazed since time began. And the journey of it was never without company. For the forest legions were on the run in every direction.

As the miles were left behind, the keen, clean mountain air became no longer a joy to breathe. There was smoke in it. It came in thin gusts and dispersed. It brought its burning reek. But ever, as it came, something of it remained behind misting the hollows and shrouding the stillness of the forest aisles.

Jink had no heed for any of it. He had heed only for his objective. And as the smoke drift thickened, and a low booming thunder of the distant fire took possession of the air, it just stirred his harshest blasphemy while he held the beast under him to its tireless effort.

So it came to the last, long, downward slope into the

valley supporting the mountain lake. It was a long, narrow aisle in the crowding woods whose canopy shadowed to an unrelieved twilight.

The pinto's unfaulting hoofs pounded the soft carpet of the forest underlay. Its nostrils were distended. Its mouth was agape. But it hurtled on to its goal like some steam driven machine whose fuel was still aplenty, and whose bearings were yet unseized. On and on. Till the tireless beast burst into the home clearing, and propped to a standstill at the almost invisible doorway of its barn.

CHAPTER IV

The Island of the Dead

THEY STOOD THERE MISTILY

outlined. The falling daylight and the thickening smoke-fog combined for a ghostliness and unreality in the forest clearing. The great wood pile, the squat barn, for which the pinto had run, were mere shadows. The living hut was completely lost behind the grey barrier of smoke.

There was a moment of embrace that was no mere greeting. Father and child stood together. And the emotion between them was superior to any fears engendered of the peril in which they knew themselves to be. There was no escape from the distant roar of wind-driven flame. The boom and crashings of falling tree-trunks. Then the choking fog which made breathing a torture. Jink was conscious of it all, its threat, the value of every passing moment. And seemingly it all remained unheeded.

For Nick, his hero had returned and his child-mind was satisfied. No terror could unship his faith with Jink there to deal with it. So they stood there together while the smoke-fog deepened.

It was Nick who bestirred himself from his father's embrace. And the child's eel-like movement seemed to recall the cattle thief to the needs of the moment.

The man scowled round at the darkening scene.

"God!" he ejaculated, as though the whole thing were incredible. "I was scared to hell for you, Nick, boy, when I see that smoke away back on the trail. You aint had storm around have you? I didn't see nothin' of it."

Nick peered up out of the grey. And he saw nothing to abash in the unlovely face.

"Guess it wasn't no storm, Pop," he said unflinchingly.
"I done it."

"You?"

"It wasn't a-purpose, Pop," the child hurried on, at the condemnation in the man's harsh tone. "It was 'way back a-top of the gorge wher' ther' ain't no getaway, an' I'd made camp. Wolves. A bunch of 'em. And they was tailin' my buckskin. I jest chased 'em up with fire sticks. Jest threw among them in the forest. Guess maybe I never thought. Couldn't have. Didn't reckon the forest was that dry and ready to fire. I'm feelin' mean, Pop. It was a bad break."

"Break?" It came with a harsh laugh which had anything but harshness behind it.

Jink had never practised honesty for himself in any form. Frankness and confession never occurred to him as a means of self expression. But he knew all three and loved them when he saw them in his son. Nick could have lied. And he, Jink, would have believed. But the child had not lied. There had been no excuse or subterfuge. And the wonderful exhibition of simple faith brought Jink an uplift that reminded him of the peril in which the child stood.

"That's all right, kid," he cried. "Forget it. That break. I got her for you. An' she's way back where the fire ain't goin' to worry nothin'. An' she's fillin' her darn guts with sweet grass so she'll be right for you. Copper Jade. Savvy? She's yours. An' you an' me'll pick her up after the fire's passed, an' run her home quick. Quick? Yep. That's it, kid. We sure got to act quick. Ther' ain't no time for a getaway with your buckskin an' the pinto. We need to beat it quick for the little old island wher' your mum's sleepin'. An' we'll stop right there till—"

"But the plugs, Pop!" The child mind had wider generosity. "We can't leave 'em. They'll—"

There was a gesture in the fog. A hand fell caressingly

about the boy's shoulders. There was a sound of laughter, too.

"Course they will, kid, if we was to leave 'em around. But we ain't goin' to, anyway. We'll need 'em both a hell sight more than ever, now. Now you beat it right along down to the little old landing an' pack into the kyak. You'll paddle like as if hell was chasin' you. See? I'm goin' to swim them two plugs across."

It was the nimble thinking which the boy understood. To which he was accustomed. There was no question. No reply of any sort. Nick just faded away in the smoke. And Jink listened to the patter of running, bare feet until it was lost in the ever growing roar of the distant, oncoming fire.

Jink turned to the barn doorway and passed within. To him it was all the practice of a life lived on the defensive. It was just different. That was all. A fresh emergency. A threat of death that had no rope in it.

Jink's preparations were of the simplest, swiftest. He saddled and hauled the buckskin from within the stable where as yet it was unaffected by any terror of fire. He led it up to the familiar stable companion, and secured its halter shank to the check band of the drooping pinto's bridle. Then he vaulted into the saddle, and hustled the two animals across the befogged clearing.

He had no concern at the moment for the child who he knew would obey his orders literally. Nick would make the island as surely as though full sunlight were showing him the way. The mountain mists were a common condition of the boy's life.

He was less happy in his own share of the getaway. He could, of course, rely on the pinto. River-swimming was part of its common practice in a life of criminal pursuits. But the waters of the lake were always frigid, whatever the season. And Nick's buckskin was without the other's experience. Then the island was far out on the lake. And

at any time, if the wind eased, he would be left to a blind and hopeless groping in the fog.

As he reached the water's edge Nick's kyak shot out from the landing and vanished in the mist. And Jink was left to his task with a realization that his fears were not without real foundation. The wind *was* easing.

The fact, however, merely spurred his determination. He drove the willing pinto into the shallows. There was a desperate pull back by the cayuse. But the sober beast beside it refused to be deflected. It ignored the flounder, and the buckskin was forced into the deeper water.

It was slow, laboured. But the journey was accomplished without accident. And only with the buckskin's ineffectual alarms.

At the low shelving shore of the island Nick was waiting ready to help Jink with the horses, and to accept further orders. But the horses needed no help. They just charged through the island shallows and plunged up the shore. A moment later the child was listening to orders which startled him, and left him uncertain.

Jink had leaped from the saddle.

"Take 'em along up, kid," he said sharply. "Right up to the shack," he added, as though it were the abode of life instead of death. "Get their saddles off 'em. An' turn 'em loose. They'll forage on the scrub or starve. We can't haul fodder over. I'm gettin' along across with the kyak for blankets an' a grub stake. You just wait around till I get back. Guess there'll be three of us sharin' that old shanty fer to-night, anyway." And he laughed.

The child peered, startled. The misted figure of his father was already moving back down to the kyak. His trouble remained hidden in the fog. But his instant reaction betrayed it.

"In there, Pop?" he cried, in a gust of childish horror. "Us? But she's dead. Been dead years."

The man's laugh was callous. Nor did he pause in his going. His reply came back over his shoulder.

"Why, say!" he cried, with a jeer. "You ain't scary, Kid? Guess your mom hadn't a thing but good fer you when she was up an' around. I can't see she ain't the same now she's a stiff. It's that shanty, or the open. Tain't time fer makin' the big squeal. Just beat it up with them plugs, an' act the way I sed. There's a hell sight worse than any pore mean stiff in the darn fire—you—lit."

The heartlessness of it was the way of the man. But his feelings were different. As he reached the kyak Jink's gaze was on the shadowy forms of the boy and the moving horses. And in it was a lingering of amused affection.

Finally he turned to the boat with a shrug.

He knelt up in it and thrust from the shore. Then he dipped his paddle.

Jink knew a great sense of relief and content. Nick was beyond the reach of the fire. He was well enough aware that the island was not wholly immune from the chances of the fire. There was its sun-scorched scrub. And the great old inflammable pine. But there was always the windward shore and the shallows. If it burned it burned. The child was still safe.

Now he was free to complete those plans he had prepared. And which were secret even from Nick.

Nick was troubled but obedient. The latter was inevitable. He led the horses up to the primitive mausoleum and off-saddled them. And he stood there, peering after them as they mouched off into the scrub, with the whole of his child being in unconscious revolt that their night was to invade the sanctity of his mother's grave.

As the ghostly shapes of the horses lost themselves in the smoke drift he turned to the little building that was mutely standing just beyond his shoulder. His eyes moved in a furtive, apprehensive, sidelong glance which took in the dim sentry pine standing guard over the precious, but half-feared, grave.

He tried to absorb his father's harsh philosophy. He tried to remember that mother who "hadn't a thing but good" for him. He tried to tell himself that she was no different now that she was shut up within that grave Jink had built for her. But he made no headway with his loyal attempt.

His only reaction was a shiver of fear such as never before had assailed him. It was a wintry shiver despite the heat borne on the wind driving down out of the gorge which he knew to be ablaze. It shook him badly. There was a moment when his teeth were chattering in response to it. Then, for a second time in a day of happy anticipations now completely evaporated, sobs choked his smoke-aching throat.

Despite apparent weakness the child was of sound metal. He sobbed because his sobs would not be denied. But his courage and hero-worship were proof against any assault upon them. He reminded himself that the whole mischief was of his doing. He must accept all the consequences. So he choked back his rush of tears. But he hurriedly moved from the proximity of that abode of the dead.

He passed down the shingle to the water's edge, and gave his whole mind to the thunders rolling over the waters out of the hidden gorge.

In a few moments the miracle of childhood expressed itself. The child's resilience was precisely that of his years and upraising. He became absorbed by the greatness of the terror which he knew could no longer harm him.

He peered into the hot wind which smarted his eyes with the smoke it drove into them. He narrowed them to slits and blinked under the strain. The whole world it seemed was shrouded in fog, and thundering its blind agony and resentment. And somehow he found liking for the roar of hidden flames and the ever-growing loudness of the booming crashes, and the splutter and fierce crackling of resinous

wood. He knew the whole thing was there away westwards. Yet the entire world seemed to be crying out. The din of it was all-pervading.

The evening light was fast passing. A fact which seemed to deepen the smoke drift and make it more impenetrable. Soon, he felt, long before Jink returned to him, there would be nothing but the black fog of it and the din which so reminded him of the crashing mountain storms which used to torture him with their elemental terror when he was smaller.

This, of course, was different. It was something real and understandable. It had its known source which he knew. Fire. The same as any camp-fire he had so often lit. It had nothing whatever to do with lightnings and all that thunder that came from nowhere except some black cloud.

He became possessed by a great stirring of excited interest, of eager curiosity, of absorbed fascination. He knew he was safe beyond the fire's reach. Jink had said so. Then the fire could not cross the water of the lake. Water always put a fire out. It was wonderful that he could stand there quite safely, with the whole world ablaze with a fire he, himself, had lit.

It was a strange metamorphosis in a child who had sobbed at his first discovery of the terrible offence against the outland laws which he had committed so thoughtlessly. He had no inclination to tears now. No regret at his crime. No conscience pricking. It did not occur to him as a tragedy that presently the fire would sweep down on the only home he had ever known and blot it out of existence. Even that wonderful birthday gift, Copper Jade, found no place in his thoughts. No. He was just waiting there for it to happen. Something. But he possessed not the smallest idea of what it was.

But he knew it, on the instant, when it came.

It was a dull radiance penetrating the swirling pall of smoke. A ruddy glow of light which bespoke flame that was incredible in its withering, destroying fire. Its first glimpse

was seemingly vague and far off, away somewhere beyond the mouth of the gorge. But that was only because of the density of smoke.

But it rapidly impressed itself, brightening and spreading. Nick realized a violent increase in the tumult of sounds which the wind brought with it. Then he understood that the gorge itself had been straddled, and fire was leaping down on the lake on all sides. And he wondered, wondered and hoped for the moment when the flames would bare themselves and he would see the glory of it all.

It came so startlingly, at last, that Nick's small mental equipment could scarcely resist the flaming onslaught. He flung up hands to shield his eyes from an almost blinding vision. It was a wave of flame breaking out of the fog. It was like a tidal wave licking out over the lake. It flashed. And it was gone. Swallowed by the void above the waters.

Its eclipse was no more than momentary, however. It had been the advance guard of that which lay behind it. The herald of a conflagration which set a child heart hammering with excitement, and filling him with the impulse to shout aloud the ecstasy with which it thrilled him.

It broke out from a dozen points along the lake shore with a simultaneity whose omen was lost upon the child. It linked up into a sea of flame. It ran up the trunks of the serried ranks of primordial pines which represented ages of laboured growth. It plunged into the lofty canopy of foliage, scorched by the summer sun to explosive ripeness. And the result was a blazing wall of fire that looked to be hundreds of feet high.

Hysteria laid hold of Nick's young senses. The destructive chaos set the small brain rocking insecurely. It was the immensity, the ferocity, the devilish dancing of the flames, and the thunders and crackings behind them.

The child cried out and shielded his eyes from the burning heat driven into them. Then he laughed. A giggling, senseless laughter that bore in it a note of dementia. He swayed, shifting his balance from one foot to another. He

shuffled. He could not still either hands, or feet, or that shrill of empty laughter. And then in the midst of all his nerve rack his child heart froze in sudden horror.

Jink!

It was a leap of memory unsought. And it scattered dementia and left him sane. Jink was over there. There with that flame. He was gone with the kyak for blankets and food, because—because they were to pass the night with his dead mother.

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Jink flogged the waters and reached the landing. But for the whole way of it, his mind knew little ease. He reassured himself a dozen times on the way. And as many times he found himself counting chances in which he could find no favour.

He saw his right plan, and agreed to the sense of it. Yet he dismissed it. He turned it down flat for a deadly risk that his emotions might know peace. He decided that his first work should be the blankets and food that Nick might know comfort of body and belly. That other now, in the crisis of his life, must take a long second place. That other which was a passion little less than his love for his child.

The kyak to the floating logs, and Jink stepped ashore carrying his long, rawhide mooring rope. He made the extreme end of it fast for the boat's better safety. He thrust the craft off shore, and watched the wind drive it straining. Then he turned to the smoke-blind aisles of the forest. He listened, estimating. Then he hunched his shoulders and ran, stumbling and floundering in the fog of it all, for the clearing.

Gasping and sweating he came to the familiar home. And the work of collecting the necessities was prosecuted with a desperate urge. He had made the calculation of it to suit his purpose. And he knew the sum of it was all wrong. Only luck could serve him.

There was the boy's sleeping bag of wolf-skins. There

were two cotton blankets his warm young flesh would be wrapped in before the child sheathed into his furs. There was an iron pot, and such fresh meat and flour as he could lay his hands on. Matches, too, which, in the circumstances, seemed superfluous. Finally there was Nick's fur coat, which had been fabricated between them. For himself—nothing.

Outside the hut he loaded himself with care for freedom of movement. He knew that hands and legs must serve for eyes that were blinded. Then he stood taking the most careful bearings before essaying the path which would carry him back to the landing.

He achieved for all the blindness of it as he knew he would achieve. And he hauled in his boat. There was no niceness of stowing. There was neither time nor inclination. He pitched everything to the bottom of the craft, and thrust her out again to strain for safety.

He turned again to face the blind labyrinth of the forest for that other. At least he had passed one milestone in safety.

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It was the mammoth decaying bole of a storm-riven oak. The giant had been split to its foundations. It was so vast and aged that it had kept a wide clearing about itself by reason of its all dominating growth. A tangle of limbs of mighty proportions were sprawling in every direction. But they were still shouldered by the parent trunk.

In the broad light of a clear day it must have been a sad spectacle of Nature's wanton. In blinding fog it was no more than a hidden wreckage which Jink spent precious time and effort in reaching. It lay nearly a half mile inland from the landing on the lake, and remote from all chances of discovery by the men of law and order who might invade his home.

He had reached it with all his instinct serving. And it was that queer sense of direction which belongs to the creature with years of forest and the open plains in the blood

passed on to it. It was that same sense which had driven the blind passage of the kyak across the lake.

Jink groped each great limb, blindly seeking that which must serve. And he found it easily. It was one particular limb bigger than all the rest. In a moment he had leapt upon it, and was ascending its slope to its junction with the split and decayed hollow of the bole.

The man's groping hands contacted with his objective as an ear splitting crash boomed, seemingly just behind his shoulder.

He desisted from his search to look round into the fog. He saw the rosy glare lighting the fog. He was scorched by a fierce gust of burning heat. And he turned again, and plunged both hands into the rotting hollow of the tree.

He lifted. And his treasure was in his hands.

Now he was driven to action that was inspired by little thought. He leapt down from the tree-limb and strove to measure his chances. It was impossible. The fire was at the clearing. And great gusts of flame were flashing through the blinding smoke. In moments it would sweep the very spot on which he was standing. His one chance was there clear in his mind. There was no time for anything else.

He plunged across the open in a northerly direction. He must risk the woods for the lake shore. He vanished where the doomed trees crowded.

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The world was blind and smoking. The air was alive with flying particles. There were myriads of sparks which flamed to brilliancy, shone dully, and expired. The fire reek was nauseating with the stench of burned resin, and a roasting heat was borne over a charred waste on a driving wind.

A great woodstack was charred to cinders. A pitiful horse barn was a fallen, smouldering pile. A home, that once had been human shelter, was belching smoke from the ashes that were left of it. A black, besieging army of burnt tree-trunks beleaguered the ruin of it all.

Out on the ruffling waters of the lake a kyak, still unscathed, strained like a hound in leash. It was still pitching and rolling under the pressure of wind. It was still waiting the dip of the paddle that was to urge it across to the island of the dead.

Somewhere sprawled at the foot of a charred forest giant was all that remained of a cattle thief who had failed to recognise the fallibility of a blinded mind striving for direction. He had set out to run. He had continued to run. Now he was no longer running.

Nearby to the roasted flesh was the twisted remains of a metal box. Something had melted about the hinges of its lid. Its lid was left agape. And its contents lay revealed. Ashes. Black, curled ashes. Valueless relics of that which once had been paper currency.

Presently the world would become cool again. The air would clear, and settle to a right temperature. Then Nature would return to Her normal function. And the forests would become reborn.

CHAPTER V

Copper Jade

LIVE OAK SPAT OUT A CHEW

of tobacco. For awhile he remained gazing afar. His lean nostrils smelling the air like those of some attenuated war-horse. It was the reek of burning. And in his queer eyes was that concern of the hillman who knows and fears the peril of forest fire. He produced a plug of tobacco from a pocket and bit off a fresh chew. Then he pointed the ground under his horse's hoofs.

"Hers!" he ejaculated.

And he set off ahead, the beast under him breaking into an easy lope.

Benny Hyles watched the speeding heels over the moistly founded grass with a twinkle of that ready humour that was part of his queer make-up. Grant Wilford looked after the ranchman, too. It was a pensive gaze that was without any of the humour of the other whose iron-grey cow-pony kept sedate pace with the black that Grant was riding.

It was the miry bottom of a wide valley that was vividly green. It was the third day of trailing the hills in search of Copper Jade and her companion fillies. They had picked up hoof prints in the soft ground as they reached the valley bottom. And they were following the spoor of them along the marshy bank of a creek.

The air was heavily charged with the reek of burning. But no fire had touched the region. In the broad light of the late summer sun the air was faintly misted with smoke which refused to disperse. But that was all.

Wooded slopes ringed the valley in on all sides. Dark green, sweeping woods, like the surface of unbreaking ocean rollers, sheltering under lofty summits. And the wide pas-

ture of vivid grass nursed a meandering stream that flowed down out of the north west.

Grant Wilford saw the ranchman swing away from the river and head towards a steep rise which was twin in height with the far side of the opening through which the stream entered the valley. He nodded at the receding figure as Live Oak's pony breasted the slope to disappear under a shelter of spruce.

"Looks like a hot trail the way he's heading," he said, in his easy drawl.

Benny cocked an eye.

"Live Oak's a queer bird, if that's not a libel on feathers. Still, the vulture *is* a bird, anyway. He's got the sort of eye that never misses anything but what it don't reckon to see. He's wanting to see the Jade's tracks. And I guess he figgers not to lose what he's found. But I can't see she's likely to leave any sort of tracks in the stuff lying under the spruces he's ridden into. I wonder what sort of junk's got into that darn head of his."

The horses shuffled on, carefully avoiding the tracks on the river bank.

"Plenty, by the looks of it, Benny," Grant mused. "Shall we follow these tracks, or go after him? We're heading right along at that patch where the fire was burning. How came that flareup? Why? It's either storm or man. There hasn't been a storm in weeks. And Jink's got his burrow in those hills. How?"

Benny shook his head.

"A hell-sight too bright a tradesman to make fire in his home town, Jink Woodley," he negatived with decision at once.

"And there hasn't been storm. Looks like we got to guess again."

"Try it out yourself, Gran."

"Yeah."

The drawl of it was thoughtful, and Benny waited. Benny was quick, hot, explosive. But he had a vast respect for the

thinking capacity of the big, slow-speaking creature whose black had an amble that kept his own horse jolting his body in an uneasy trot.

"Live Oak guesses we've hit her tracks. I'd say he knows," Grant admitted frankly. "He guesses Jink Woodley stole her with the others. Live Oak makes these tracks look like heading plumb into the burnt stuff. Then the burnt stuff and Jink belong."

Benny lifted his reins.

"Wise. Let's hoof it after him," he said, on a swift impulse. "But you're wrong someway, too, Gran," he went on, as the horses loped easily over the soft going. "Jink markets across the border. We've had that years. He's not yearning for the sort of worry the Jade's liable to hand him feedin' his home pastures. Think again."

"Sure."

Grant's toleration was of that quality which made discussion with a man of Benny's temper easy.

"If Jink didn't fire his—home-town, maybe he left some mule-head there who did. If Jink trades his loot across the border, and is trailing for that fire patch with the Jade and the others, it looks like he's worrying for that mule-head, or something, he left behind. It looks like we'll find Jink's about chasing up a fresh burrow. And the Jade's still with him. He's not the sort to offer himself, or his loot, any sacrifice to fire for the sake of any—mule-head. No. Jink's headed this way for a look-see when he got wise to the stuff happening around his home-town. We'll find Live Oak's lost those tracks when we make that hill-top."

It was all coolly straight thinking, and Benny was impressed. But he was hardly convinced. He jerked an affirmative head, nevertheless, under its wide-brimmed prairie hat.

"Good stuff, Gran," he agreed, with a side-glance that revealed an uneasy eye. "But it don't seem to get us to the depot, someway. It's said Jink had a woman. And it don't look to me you can figger even a cattle thief's acts when a

skirt flashes itself at him. But Jink's not the sum of this as I see it. I don't care a curse what Jink's doing with himself. But I want that Jade. And a hangin'-bee don't look like passin' me a laff. We've struck the Jade's trail. Live Oak knows it. I'm for hittin' it up if it heads us into the darn ice that never melts. She's carrying Kentucky Kid's. And I played those dollars for my boy, Roddy."

Grant made no verbal reply. But his glance of understanding as he nodded his big head was sufficient. They increased their speed and began the ascent in Live Oak's wake. And as they climbed out of the hollow, on a definite but faint track that showed no hoof prints, their interest quickened.

It was Benny who found instant comment as his nimble cow-pony led the other.

"Live Oak's a whale. Show him a hoss-thief's trail and there's not a thing this side of hell to make him lose it."

Grant's nod was illuminating.

"Maybe wise to the play of it, I guess."

And Benny laughed.

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They came up with him at the summit of the hill. Live Oak was gazing out over a blue-grass valley, that, like the hollow behind them, was thinly misted. But literally he was gazing away far beyond it, eastward, where smoke was still defying a tempering breeze coming down out of the west.

The story of it was there to read. In that rising smoke. The fire had passed. Its fury was dead. It had raced on, devouring, to its own destruction. One of Nature's own insurmountable fire breaks had done that which no cunning of man could have achieved. The blazing terror was at its last gasp.

Live Oak remained unmoving as the others came up. He seemed indifferent to everything but that which he had dis-

covered. He sat quite still in his saddle, a straight-legged image.

Nor was he a prepossessing image. At no time a creature of beauty, now there was a demoniac expression in eyes that were a flaming fury. It transformed him into something that suggested the climax of a totem pole, or the starved frame of an Inca's most unamenable deity. He was a living expression of murder and hate.

The face was ravaged with hollows where bone support was lacking. And his black eyes were mere white-rimmed pools concealing the deeps of the cavities in which they were set. His lank, shining black hair out-flowed from beneath his limp, wide brimmed hat and greased the collar and shoulders of his buckskin shirt. And the stained skin of him might well have belonged to any race but the white origin which was definitely his.

Sitting there in mute mental disturbance, only the big-framed cow-horse under him, his buckskin and ancient chaps, and a brace of twin guns, each fashioned with seven chambers and a hair-trigger, lifted him out of the realms of a child nightmare and endowed him with human personality. Beauty abandoned Live Oak's home pasture when the cattleman was foaled.

He rolled a chew of tobacco over in his cheek and spat. Then an arm was flung out. And a finger, that shook with rage, pointed.

"See, folks," he cried hoarsely. "I sed they were here, an' there she is. Look! That pore darn bunch standin'—standin' like they was struck. Them copper fillies. The Jade. That's Jink! Wot he done! God melt his marrer with hot irons!"

It was vibrant with passion. It was the heart of a horse-lover caught in a crash of grief.

The others stared down into the heart of the sweet-grass bottom nearby to a bank of the stream which was a continuation of that which they had left behind them. A small

cluster of sorrel fillies was standing there, heads together, drooping.

A queer lament crept into the cattleman's harsh voice as he went on.

"The pore darn kid! Look at her. Them. Linked like sassiges. Roped so they can't feed. Can't water. An' her carryin' her foal. God A'mighty! My guts get sick thinkin'. Jink Woodley'll sure get his."

The long arm dropped to Live Oak's side. And he turned in his saddle to the man who owned. It was the practical ranchman who spoke.

"We'll get 'em out of that muss up, I guess, boss, an' see 'em watered right, an' pass 'em a bunch o' that sweet grass." Then his tone flung back to its harshest. "Looks like you two best run 'em back east to their pastures while I get on an' fix things. Jink Woodley's pinto ain't along among 'em," he added significantly. "An' I ain't sleepin' till I seen the sort o' fancy pattern its lousy patchwork makes."

Benny Hyles shook his head.

"You got it wrong, Live Oak," he snapped shortly.

The queerly staring eyes of the ranchman glared harder.

"How's that?"

The tone of the question would have warned. But Benny only cocked an eye. There was a curious grin in it as he replied suavely. Too suavely.

"You've put over a swell show-piece trailing 'em, boy. You've picked them up. And I guess I feel so good about it we'll call her foal 'Live Oak' if she shows us a colt. But we passed an honor promise to a woman. And we're standin' pat for it. You haven't a front seat at any hanging-bee with Jink Woodley kicking atmosphere. Get me?"

They sat there eye to eye with the moments passing. And Grant Wilford, looking on, found great amusement. He knew the bond between Benny and his foreman. And he knew the hot Kentucky blood that they shared. Live Oak's

gesture was the sort of thing he expected when at last it came. It was a clenched fist threatening the world.

"Tcha!" It spat out from between snapping teeth. "See right here! You're boss o' your own layout. But it's jest yours an' no one else's. See? If you fancy clampin' teeth into pie-mush get right to it. I don't care a curse. But mine's grinded years on the sort of cast iron junk your bunk house hands the boys. They ain't no sort o' use for pie. I told no honour promise. You ain't puttin' that over on me. I jest passed a kid gal a rope to skip the way you sed. Maybe ther' won't be that hangin'-bee. But you ain't at the right end o' my guns an' won't be—ever. Ef God A'mighty ain't no better sense than to set a rustler like Jink Woodley crawl-in' around His airth it's His. But He ain't got no kick comin' if a right boy bumps him to the hell he belongs. Nor ain't you. He's hurt a pore blamed filly lass. An' he ain't gettin' away with that sort of play on me. Not for you nor no one. Not if you was Presidint of the whole darn United States, which you ain't."

The easy drawl of Grant Wilford saved inevitable explosion.

"Maybe he hasn't got away with it, Live Oak," he said quietly.

And the others abandoned hostilities.

Grant leant over the horn of his saddle as the other two turned to him. There was shrewd compulsion in his levelled gaze. He gestured.

"Looks like you're right the way you said, Live Oak," he admitted, watching the edge of the ranchman's temper. "Jink Woodley needs to get it—if he hasn't got it already."

He turned, gazing out over the hills where the fire had passed. And his big shoulders lifted expressively.

"Why are those fillies standing around down there?" he went on. "They've been left roped ready for lead. If there's sense in things it's because that rotten cattle thief reckoned he was coming back for 'em—lick. Even a hoss thief don't

take chances with timber wolves around. In three days he hasn't got back. And they're still lashed up so they can't feed or water. Wal?"

There was an easy smile in the gaze that again levelled itself on the uneasy foreman.

"Looks easy to me," Grant continued, and shook his massive head. "There's no need to worry for Jink now we've picked up the fillies. It's a guess—sure. But it looks that way to me. In three days he hasn't got back—with a bunch of chances waiting on the fillies he fancied. Maybe God Almighty don't need your help, Live Oak. Maybe He's done that bumping Himself. But if I know anything, that pretty Jade down there, with her Kentucky Kid foal, looks like needing your help more than God Almighty does. Your help. And more than she does Benny's and mine. See it. I don't guess there's the match of you around a sick filly. Then it'll leave Benny and me to see God Almighty's done His job right. And if He hasn't we can just pass Jink along to the Calford Police. That way we can keep an honour promise—clean."

The persuasion of it was irresistible. Then the flattery was of that quality which could not fail in its appeal. The turbulent Kentuckian was soothed at the thought of what he could do for the fillies. The eyes observing saw the fading of Live Oak's hectic temper. And they saw something else.

"Wal?"

The urge drawled softly. Grant knew precisely when and how to use it.

There was no doubt. First the "totem climax." It inclined grudging agreement. Then the man's sunken features came into play. They contorted. It was Live Oak's nearest approach to a grin. His hands moved in a gesture of pretended helplessness.

"Don't rightly know," he complained, like a thwarted child. "Seems like I ain't no sort of savvy. Must be mush-headed."

He looked down at the cluster of fillies. And their attitude of utter dejection hurt.

"That's all right, boss," he said, as though his decision had just been taken. "That durn honour promise. I'll play no dirt on it. Guess it's the sort of junk no right cattleman needs to hand out. But it don't signify. I do allow God A'mighty's up agin a tough proposition handlin' the sort of junk that calls itself human. But seein' He done it I guess it's up to Him. If He's settin' in the game, the way you folks figger, I don't reckon there's sense in straddlin' His ante. It's a hundred dollars to a shuck the deck's stacked. Guess I'll handle that pore kid gal down there. And you folks can go call His hand, or any other durn foolishness."

He lifted his reins with a jerk. And the big frame under his saddle loped down the hill.

CHAPTER VI

In the Wake of the Fire

THE SKY WAS WITHOUT A cloud. But the azure vault of it became pathetic in its smile upon a stricken world. The gleam of a westering sun was searching the charred and blackened devastation which had once known the glory of Nature's artistry.

Grant Wilford and Benny Hyles had ridden hard for many miles to discover the melancholy story of it all.

A gossamer shroud of the thinnest smoke strove to conceal the hideous nakedness to which fire had stripped the hillsides. And all it contrived was a sun-burnish that was like to the soft effulgence of a misted fall sunset. It lit the black legions in their stark nakedness, picturing a skeleton world which had been shorn of all the vivid garments which Nature spends her time in weaving.

Grey and black ashes replaced the decaying underlay of the aged forests. Shorn of all but the stumps of dismembered limbs the shattered forest giants stood up to gaze upon the slaughter they had had to endure. And about their feet sprawled the skeleton remains of that which once had been flourishing under-growth. Nothing consumable by fire had been left unscathed.

The horses had been left at the homing ruins where Jink Woodley's clearing had been cut. And the two cattlemen had moved abroad searching the ghostliness of it all, a prey to emotions which sickened as well as awed.

They had *found* in the chance of it all. And that which they had found told them a story whose completeness was beyond all doubt.

It was within some fifty yards of the water's edge of a lake whose existence had been wholly beyond their ken.

Nor was it more from the devastated clearing where stood their horses. It was lying at the foot of a tree-trunk of monstrous charred girth.

Grant Wilford was no longer considering it. He was standing erect with a broad view of the waters nursed at the mouth of the wide flung gorge. Benny Hyles still pondered their find at his feet, which was a sickening, odorous sprawl of human flesh.

It should have revolted. But Benny was little sensitive. Myriads of flies hovered, seeming to be warring for place at an unlooked-for banquet. Benny had no thought but that he was gazing upon all that remained of the man who had robbed him, and jeopardized his precious brood mare. His whole feeling was that of satisfaction that here was the finish of a hill-scourge which had beset for so long. Jink Woodley.

The face of it lay buried in the ashes of the forest underlay. Its arms had twisted themselves into attitudes queerly grotesque. The legs were drawn up into an almost impossible position under the trunk, as though kneeling, the dying body had toppled forward without further movement. There was a nauseating stench of burnt flesh emanating from beneath the charred remains of outer clothing. But that which seemed to rivet the whole attention of the Kentuckian was a head snatched bald by fire under a burnt out hat which still clung to it. The man had been roasted alive.

Benny made a sound through his teeth. Then he spoke with cold disregard for the tragedy of it.

"Live Oak'll feel good about it, I guess," he said. "Looks like God Almighty's put the job over right." His gaze passed on to the contorted remains of a metal box displaying burned ashes within it. It was within a foot or so of one of the dead man's hands. "Looks like he was toting his bank roll, or the family papers, or something. But folks are like that, I s'pose."

"Yeah."

Grant was quite unheeding. His gaze was on a great old pine tree standing away out over the lake. The only living thing in a dead world it was sadly drooping in the way of its kind. But, in the mist, its unscathed foliage stood out vividly. He pointed its direction.

"That," he said. "See it? Just to the right. And below it. Something moving with a splash of white to it. It's a horse. And—a pinto."

Something had stirred the man out of his usual slow speech. He was peering intently. Even eagerly.

"See it, Benny," he went on, with an urge. "It's not too clear, I guess. There. Right back in that scrub. It's Jink's pinto. And it's alive."

"And a roof, too, Gran!" Benny's reply came instantly. "There. By the tree. A shack. Looks like we haven't got it all—yet."

"No."

The two men became absorbed in their fresh discovery. For some moments they searched the distance. They realized the island which the fire had left untouched. And its significance bore in on them.

"His—gopher burrow?" Grant said at last.

"Running for it. And toting his can of loot," Benny agreed.

"Then there's a way over. We'll get down to the shore."

Benny took a final look at the dead thing. And the imp in his hot eyes was savage.

"Beats hell," he said. "When it comes to handin' a punch the 'God Almighty' stuff's got your Live Oaks licked out of sight. Guess there's things back of it. And they don't set a boy yearning to laff. I'm glad."

"No."

It was flung over Grant's shoulder as he led the way towards the lake shore.

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They reached the water's edge. And a nearer approach

brought the island into clearer view. It was Benny who claimed further discovery. With the moving pinto form was another. The buckskin of the cayuse showed quite plainly above the scrub.

Grant agreed at once. But his own search was along the wide foreshore. He pointed the eastward distance where Jink's kyak was lying close into the small log landing. It was no longer straining at the leash of its moorings.

"That's it," he said. "That was the getaway he didn't get time to make. Say, Benny, he'd got it all fixed. Those plugs of his didn't swim themselves across. All fixed dead right. And then—!"

"Hell-fire."

"Sure, Hell's fire. We need to make it across right away. There's poor fool hoss-flesh over yonder. I'd say we can't leave 'em to eat that darn pimple bald."

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It was a moment of strong men's real emotion. It was far deeper than either of the two would have cared to acknowledge. Both the cattlemen had child life of their own. And both knew the joy of it and the beauty of its possession. They had set out to salve a cattle thief's pinto and its companion from the slow starvation threatening them. And instead they found themselves with a life far more appealing on their hands.

The island had come to them swiftly enough under the powerful drive of Grant Wilford's single paddle. There had been nothing to deter or delay. They had grounded lightly on the loose shingle of the shore, from which young Nick had witnessed the complete annihilation of his world. The kyak had been lifted from the water. And, still in possession of the miscellaneous cargo which Jink had flung into it, it was lying there ready for any further work required in the mission of succour.

The men had hurried up the shore to round-up and bring the two horses to safety. But they did not reach the horses.

They did not get beyond the lone sentry pine, with the little log shanty built within its shadow.

It was the inert body of young Nick. It was sprawled as though the child, in his mental anguish and bodily suffering, had sought the protective shelter of his mother's grave. He had no more covering than his tatter of cotton shirt, and the bunched garment strapped about his young loins. He was lying in an attitude as though he had fallen from a sitting posture. And his ashen face and closed eyes suggested the peace of death.

The discovery produced a swiftness of movement in Grant Wilford that was unusual. Before the quicker Kentuckian had time even to ejaculate, the Canadian was crouching over the young body and handling it with the tenderness of a woman. The man's hands went to pulse and heart. They tried the boy's inert limbs. They moved the whole body in search of wound, or some deadly contusion. Perhaps they were unskilled hands. But they had strength and kindness behind them. Also they held a wealth of life's experience.

Benny remained silent. He contented himself with looking on, peering at the dark beauty of the child's death-like features. That which he beheld may have warned him of the child's origin. But the only reaction it produced in the man was a queer yearning.

As Grant stood up from his examination Benny flung an urgent question.

"That poor kid? He's not dead, too, Grant?" he asked anxiously.

Grant's steady eyes blinked shut as he nodded reassuringly.

"Hit the limit I'd say. But not dead," he said. "No. Nothing amiss but no eats. That kid hasn't eaten for days. Belly and bowels flapping empty. Pore darn little kid. Played right out for need of food."

There was perceptible relief. And Benny's eyes went back to the still figure at the foot of the door.

"Jink's," he said. And he further regarded the tight shut door.

"Yeah. I'd say so."

"His, and that woman's," Benny went on reflectively, his eyes still on the door. "What you make of this shack?"

Grant's big shoulders went up. He was concerned only for the life sprawled at the foot of its door.

"We'll search it later maybe," he said.

Benny nodded.

"Jink set him over here with those plugs for safety," he argued on. "Then went back—"

"Sure. Looks that way. But we're talking, Benny," Grant said warningly. "Beat it up and round-up those plugs. We're going to need them. Saddle 'em—there's the saddles." He pointed the saddles where Nick had thrown them. "And swim them. I'm handling this bit of a kiddie. We need to hustle. I'll dope him a shot of hooch out of your flask and tote him over in the barge. Maybe he'll come to. Can't say. We'll have to lash him fast to a saddle. It's sixty odd back to Hester. But she's got to get him—alive. It's just one hell of a chance and we'll take it."

CHAPTER VII

Children of the Outlands

HESTHER WILFORD SAW LIFE from the calm view point of steady sense and benign altruism. In her care for others, however, she never discovered in fallibility the need for the correctional so characteristic of worthy human nature. She was a never failing influence for happiness in the life that surrounded her. And something of her quiet strength and gentle calm found reflection in the manner of the man beside whom she had striven toward a common achievement.

Deeply against her woman's hope child-bearing only came late, and once, in her life. And when it did, still against her hope, she produced her own sex. But her disappointment in this direction was amply compensated. It was in the adoring worship of the father of the child he insisted on calling "Billee." Forthwith she added her own to the idolatry of it.

Hester had rarely known leisure. And all yearning for it passed her by. Her whole life's amusements lay in the goal towards which she and Grant were labouring. And in the process of it she collected all the content and happiness that lay by the wayside.

She was knitting by the light of the last of the day, her comfortable figure ensconced in the favoured wicker chair on the broad porch of her home. The work went on almost automatically while her dark brown gaze and calm thought meandered over the interests which were her life.

There was Billee squatting on the porch flooring nearby, schooling a semi-circle of dolls, similarly squatting, in her own understanding of things Biblical. There was the valley over which the shadows were creeping out of the east. There

were the barns and corrals, below her, where restless cattle made their evening sounds. While the bunk house offered the noise of a vocal duet laden heavily with sentiment. It was peace. That alluring peace which belongs only in a world pastoral when Nature smiles at the close of a long working day.

Hester's needles ceased clicking, and her work rested in her lap as she suddenly found herself giving heed to her six-year daughter.

Billee was absorbed in her eager pursuit. Her mother's smiling regard was unobserved. Her deep violet eyes were without their usual bright smile. And there was a prim little pursing of her still soft baby lips. She was the school-teacher.

Her class was ranged in front of her in a carefully described semi-circle. There were twelve pupils, all except one of which sadly lacked that completeness so essential in human well-being. Some had heads and no features. Some had a shortage of those limbs accounted of need. Some were short on garments. And all were lacking in the vocal qualities of which the child herself possessed abundant store.

One, only, was a creature apart. She was the only other lady present. A flamboyant creation of huge proportions, who squatted apart from eleven boys, queening it in immaculate completeness and raiments of vivid hues.

But Billee was frankly and unashamedly all for the ragamuffins clad as boys. She fussed with them. She patted them and put them straight. She chided them. And she sat each one up straight again when he toppled over. She left the large lady to the glory of her frills, and her regal isolation.

But that which claimed the mother's swift attention was the uttering of a name. It was "Roddy, boy." Nor would she have admitted the reason of her interest. But then, deep beneath her clear, steady sense lay the woman with all the happy romance which she strove to keep hidden. Rodney

Hyles, the fair-haired son of their life's friend, Benny, was the desire of her life as a mate for her child.

The "Roddy, boy," of Billee's game was a dishevelled and battered personality. His head was bald. And every feature was missing from that which had once been a vividly decorated composition face. He was wholly short of one arm, and a leg appeared to have been treated surgically at the place where a knee should have functioned. Billee's passion for "Roddy, boy," was there in her affectionate chiding. And in her concern for the helplessness imposed by anatomical lop-sidedness.

Hester saw the doll picked up. She watched the child's admonishing finger and smiled happily.

"Now you, Roddy, boy. I's won't have you falling around like Live Oak when they brings him back from Blacktail. You'se not a souse nor nuffin'. You're a good boy really on'y you're a dunce. Now set right up. There! You gotta be a zample to the other boys. That's right. Just lean on Welli'ton Nelson so you can listen. It's your turn. An' you gotta answer so the boys won't know you'se a dunce, like Uncoo Benny says. It's an easy one. I guess I kep it for you. It's 'bout Jono an' a awful big whale that ate him right up. Whales is ter'ble big. An' they eats ev'ything. Now, cos why did Jono?—No. Cos why did the whale swaller pore Jono? Cos, why? Oh, dee, dee! Wot a silly boy you must be if you don't know. Spec's Uncoo Benny's right. You'se a drefful dunce. Listen. It's cos Jono wasn't a man at all! On'y a poor fish! An' so he didn't know better than to get swallered. He falled right into the water, an' the great, big, ter'ble whale swallered him right up. Seeds says whales allers swallers pore fishes. An' Seeds says he guesses Jono must have been a tough guy, and made the whale get sick, an' cough him right up again. See? That's how Jono came back, an' tol' the folks about it so they could write it all in the Bible. Seeds says the folks didn't reely believe Jono. But they guessed it was a good story, anyway, so they wro—writ it. Seeds knows all about Jono. Seeds knows ever so much—

ev'ything. An' he's going to tell me about King Solimon an' his wives an'—an' columbines. He had lots an' lots of ~~wives~~. An' oceans an' oceans of columbines. An' Seeds says columbines is real elegant flowers wot grows like ev'ything if the soils fixed right. An' he guesses Mister Solimon was quite a horti—horti—suffin', the way he growed 'em in his garden. An' Seeds says—"

"I think Seeds has said quite enough, Billee!" Hester broke in admonishing through a bubble of laughter she could not restrain. "I don't think he's at all the right man to teach you the Bible. He's just your Poppa's foreman who knows about cattle, not the Bible. The idea of his telling you about King Solomon and his wives, and—columbines. I never heard such nonsense. I shant let you go near the bunk house if you let him tell you that sort of nonsense. I'm very angry with him."

Billee's wide eyes lifted after straightening up a "Roddy-boy" who had become overwhelmed by so much information.

"But, Momsie, darling, Seeds knows just ev'ything," she expostulated. "Lots an' lots. He was at college in England wher' they're awful wise. Ever so. An' Seeds says one day I'll go to college, too. An' I'll learn like him an' know ev'ythings. And he says I'll need to watch my step or they'll send me down like they did him, cos I got red hair an' freckles like him has. Wot's 'down,' Momsie? An' why's I got red hair an' freckles like Seeds. I like Seeds. He laffs like ev'ything when he talks. Guess I'll have to marry him, or maybe Roddy, boy," she finished up thoughtfully.

The mother tried to frown. But she utterly failed. Instead of further admonishment she found herself entering into the spirit of the thing, and helping the groping child mind.

"Seeds was expelled from the University, Oxford. That's in England. He was dreadfully wicked, Billee. A very, very naughty boy. So he came out here to learn ranching

and he's got on wonderfully. And your Poppa's very—"

"But he wasn't reely wicked, Momsie," the child broke in loyally. "Cos he sed so. Seeds says it was 'just a bit of a mix up in the High,'" she quoted. "Seeds says, boys always gets into a mix up at the—the—place wher' he got sent down. Boys is just foolish. Mine is. That's why I likes 'em better as Arabella. She doesn't get in a mix up. Maybe she's a pore fish like Jono, though. I wouldn't mind if the whale swallered her right up, too, an' never corfed her up again. When'll I go to college like Seeds, Momsie? England's a awfu' long way. Seeds says—"

"You can come here, you wee small ruffian."

Hester laughed and held open arms.

"Seeds says much too much," she went on, as Billee leapt to the inviting embrace. "You'll have to go where there's no Seeds."

Billee thrust up two small hands, and coaxingly patted her mother's rounded cheeks.

"But I likes Seeds," she protested.

"Yes. I know you do. And so do I. And so does your Pop. So why go away to college when you've got your lovely hills, and your pony, and—Seeds. And 'Roddy boy.' "

There was profound cogitation for a long moment while Hester held Billee to her. Then the child brightened visibly under inspiration.

"I knows, Momsie," she cried excitedly. "You tell 'em I got freckles an' red hair. Then they'll send me down, too. Then I can marry my Roddy boy, an' go over to Uncoo Benny's where ther' isn't any Seeds to tell me 'bout Mister Solimon an' his wives an' co—columbines."

Hester hugged the slim body to her heart and laughed happily.

"That's a splendid idea, Billee, because Roddy won't mind red hair and freckles. Will he?"

Billee agreed cordially.

"Roddy likes ev'ything 'cep' hoss-thieves an' skitters," she elaborated. "Roddy says you kills hoss-thieves cos

they's badmen. I alw'ys hangs hoss thieves," she went on impressively. "Roddy showed me. I like hanging lots an' lots of hoss thieves. An' Roddy says—"

Hester laughed.

"Guess your Roddy's nearly as bad as Seeds," she said, and stood up to dislodge the child from her embrace. "But you can tell me what else he says while you have your bath. Come right along, Chick. It's most ten, and very late. Bath and bed. And a cookie to eat. And I hope there'll be no big feller whale in that bath to swallow you right up."

Billee ran to her dolls and collected two arms full.

"O-oh Momsie!" she cried ecstatically. "S'pose ther's gotta be a great big ter'ble whale. I likes 'em awfu' big. Doesn't you? An' he'll try to swaller me. An' I'll fight him like ev'ything. Can Arabella bath, too, Momsie? Then the whale can swaller her right up, 'stead of me. An' if he can't corf her up again I won't care. She'll have to be Missis Jono 'stead of me."

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Hester remained at Billee's cotside while the child ate her cookie, and until the violet of her eyes vanished under long-lashed lids. She listened for the small, familiar sounds emanating from an absurd, attractive button which was the child's nose. Then she picked up the kerosene lamp and crept from the room.

Her own bedroom adjoined. She deposited the lamp, extinguished it, and left it ready for her own use later. Then she passed out on to the porch again.

It was that supreme hour of her day when Hester's last task was completed and left behind her. And she was free to indulge herself in those woman's precious dreams for which she had neither time nor inclination when the daily round claimed her.

She leant a comfortable, shapely body to the ease of a rough stone roof support. And she gazed out contemplatively into the silver-lit beauty of the valley.

Hesther's clear thinking mind was precise and keen. But above all things she was a mother woman, full of those emotions which leave the business of life in a secondary place. She appreciated to its full the devastating nature of the change that was leaping upon her home and life. She knew all it meant to Grant, who was a cattleman by inclination as well as circumstance. She, herself, grieved at the thought of the passing of the sprawling corrals with their branding pinches. The old barns, which had always sheltered numbers of sturdy cow-ponies. The bunk house, where hardcase cattlemen blasphemed and gambled, and sang, and quarrelled to the point of slaughter. She hated the thought that the gold of ripening grain was to replace the soft hues of the sweet grass which had been the foundation of so much prosperity for them. But she saw something in it all which compensated in a direction that was irresistible.

The mother in her realized the advantage to her baby. She saw the coming of a life wherein much of the crudeness of the cattle world would know no place. She saw Billee, grown to loveliness, a college-bred girl, returning to a home wherein she would find all the conventional refinements to which an expensive education entitled her. She saw the child caught up in the best social life in Calford, instead of associating with the hardcases of the ranges. She had visions of parties. Of dances. Of all those pastimes which are suitable for a young and wealthy girl on the threshold of life.

The thought of Billee outweighed every other consideration with Hesther. Even that the passing of the cattle industry was no less than a life's tragedy to the man who was her child's father.

But it was not the prospect of social advantage lying ahead of Billee that brought the soft smile to Hesther's brown eyes as she watched the play of the brilliant moonlight on the waters of the meandering river. It was the memory of the child's game with her dolls. With, particularly, one of them. That calamity with one arm, bald head, and a face blank of all features. What a scallawag to which she

had reduced her beloved "Roddy, boy." And the mother in her knew that the poor creature's disbevelment was the more surely an expression of her babe's devotion to it.

A wave of romantic dreaming took possession of her and was permitted full play. Hester's heart was set on linking her child's life with that of their life's friend, Benny Hyles. His boy, Rodney. A big, fine, fair-haired, blue-eyed youth who worshipped the ground on which the babe Billee set her tiny feet. She wondered. Was it possible?

Could it be that childhood's love had any real meaning, significance? Could it endure, and—ripen? Was it reasonable to hope, when the meaning of life came to the boy and girl, when the fires of youth kindled into passionate flame, when mating demanded, that desire for each other would have grown with the years? She had no answer for her questions. But she had a great longing. A great motherly hope.

Hester was still smiling, still dreaming, when the sound of it came to her. It was there behind her, coming out of the western distance. And, despite the hold of her dreaming, she turned to it with all the instinct which her hill-life had bred into her.

Her senses were attuned to every sound and sign breaking the hush of Nature's repose. And her gaze at once sought the great saddle of forest linking the twin hills which marked the time-made trail to Benny Hyles' "Valley Deep."

It was a tattoo of hoofs beating on the sun-baked soil. The roll of it was close and sharp. And it told of speed and numbers. Hester knew. It could only be Grant's returning from pursuit of Benny's stolen fillies. And, judging by the sounds, the borrowed "hands" were, in all probability, returning with him.

Awhile, and the full of the moon showed her. It was the narrow gap in the forest at the saddle seat. It had filled with a confused silhouette which undoubtedly represented a cluster of horses and riders. But distance and the night defeated recognition. And she contented herself with waiting

as they pounded their way down the hither slope towards the ranchhouse.

In the valley bottom she saw more clearly. She discovered four horses and two riders. And she wondered. A nearer approach revealed a pinto amongst the horses. And Hester was possessed of the common knowledge of the foothills.

A soft-voiced hail greeted Grant and Benny Hyles as they breasted the rising ground on which stood the house. But as the spent horses reined up at the porch all Hester's attention was centred on the pinto with its securely lashed and ominous burden.

Hester watched the two men at work on either side of the pinto. Grant was nearest. Benny was beyond. They were struggling with knotted rawhide. And their movements had the haste of urgent anxiety. In the moonlight the figures of all were something unreal. A trifle ghostly. But all phantasm was dispelled by the reality of voices which sought to explain to the watching woman in the careless, disjointed fashioned of men pre-occupied with important activities.

Hester offered no word. She put no question. Which was her way. Matters would reveal themselves to her as the men talked. Questions might confuse further. And so a disjointed story linked itself together, and its full meaning took hold of her attentive mind.

Grant's epitomizing was characteristic. While Benny's foot notes from the off side of the pinto were no less.

"Hell of a chance, Hester, gal," Grant rumbled, with his hands busy. "Five hours. An' the kid nigh dead at the start. Five hours. An' sixty of tough hill country. It sure looks like miracle if the pore darn kid's still got a kick to him. Belly flappin' empty days, I'd say. Christ! Just as though the world had been set afire and burnt out."

"It's Jink's kid," Benny illuminated over the pinto's rump.

"Course it is," Grant complained. "Whose else? Jink's

burrow. Hit it after the fire had passed. Located Jink. Dead. Roasted alive, where hundred foot jack pines looked like burnt lucifers."

"Jink had the fillies with him. Left 'em back away on a patch of blue grass, tied right for the wolves, while he beat it on to get his whelp clear of the fire," Benny explained amply.

"Roasted—alive!"

Hester shuddered. Her horror took no count that Jink was a cattle thief.

"Yeah. That's how."

Grant peered over the pinto's back and encountered Benny's impish scowl.

"Clear adrift your side, Benny?" he asked.

"Sure," Benny slashed the last knot with a knife.

"Wal, stand clear. I'll handle him."

Hester watched the gentle fashion of it. It was the splendid ease of a hugely powerful man actuated by a kindly pity. Hester recognized the ominous outline under its wrappings of a fur lined sleeping bag. Grant nursed it in two big arms like some woman with her babe. He ascended the steps of the porch as though unburdened. And he talked as he stepped up to the waiting woman.

"Chance in a million we located him," he said. "Guess it was the pinto showed us. On the big lake where the darn fire couldn't get. An island. We saw the pinto across the water."

"Guess Jink had swum 'em across for safety," Benny elucidated from behind. "A licker, I'd say. Jink's kid. Never reckoned a hoss thief was that human."

Grant stepped on to the porch.

"Yeah," he drawled. "Lyin' stark wher' they'd set his dead mam. Out ther' in the open at nigh ten thousand feet. And still with a kick. Wal, I guessed you were the one to fix him right, gal. So we just pumped the hooch out of Benny's flask into him and toted him down. There's still a flutter to his pulse. So just show me wher' I better dump him. And

you get after things while we prise Seeds from his blankets and start him collectin' a live Doc Myer from Blacktail."

Without a word Hester turned into the house with Grant and Benny following. She led them into the guest-room where Benny usually slept on his visits to the "Lazy S."

"Set the pore mite right on that bed, Gran," she directed. "And I'll first get him out of that louse bag and into white man's sheets. My," she added disgustedly. "There's queer folks in this world who get the best God has to give."

The room was neat and plainly furnished. It was lit by Hester's kerosene lamp. The plain iron bedstead was spotless. And Nick, under its sheets, was clad in the warm flannel of an old fashioned winter nightgown that once had served Grant Wilford.

Hester was in full charge. While the two men stood looking on ready to obey her lightest order.

Hester had no further interest in the men's story. She had grasped all the essentials. This was Jink Woodley's child who had miraculously escaped the fire which had consumed his father. He had been left hungry, and almost stark naked, at ten thousand feet, for days. He was still alive. And it was up to her.

Even with her own Hester had never been more surely the mother. She had already done all that lay within her power for the still unconscious child. She had even succeeded in persuading warm, nourishing soup between the nerveless lips.

Now she was anxiously watching, and sensing the pulse in the wrist which her capable fingers were lightly holding. But there was no sign to afford encouragement. And her heart misgave.

"If that boy, Seeds, don't make it quick with the Doc he's got to hear of it," she threatened in her anxiety. "It's most like he's just fading right out. Poor bit!"

Grant craned towards the bed, peering over Hester's ample shoulder.

"Seeds guessed to get him quick, alive or dead," he said, studying the pallid, dusky beauty of the child with his head buried deep in the soft pillows.

Hester snorted impatience.

"Dead? He's crazy," she declared emphatically.

Benny Hyles edged up to Hester's side.

"Looks like dead," he muttered with sombre conviction.

Hester spurned with a flash of her soft brown eyes.

"You always were a Job, Benny," she scorned. "The kid's stood for your hooch, an' I guess it 'ud kill anything but a Kentucky tough. I tell you that kid's got to live. He's going to. 'Tisn't starvation. It's exposure. Ten thousand feet up in those hills without hardly a rag to the poor mite's dandy body. I want to kill somebody."

The woman's emotion was deep. There was distress in the soft eyes across which she passed a swift hand. She glanced at her man with the appeal of her sex.

"You said days—lying up there?" she asked.

"Sure. And nights like winter," Grant rumbled.

Hester turned again to the bed.

"Lungs," she said emphatically.

Benny flung characteristic agreement as he moved back from the bedside.

"Looks that way," he said. "I'd say it's got to be pneumonia if hot rye won't set life stirring."

He shrugged.

"Looks like a tough play on you, Hester," he went on. "If it's pneumonia neither you nor any Doc Myer are goin' to set that kid on his feet in weeks. Looks like months before you can pass him along over to the p'lice folk in Calford."

Hester dropped the limp arm with its flutter of pulse. She turned on Benny with a look which Grant, at least, understood.

"Longer than that, Benny," she said quietly.

Benny's eyes flamed. The woman's tone, her look left him in no doubt as to her meaning.

"But he's the whelp of a cattle thief! A killer!" He chal-

lenged, in the sort of tone that roused all Hester's ire.

"What if he is?" she snapped back.

"Jink was a lousy halfbreed," Benny retorted, in the swift heat of intolerance. "And God alone knows the sort of junk that was its mother. You haven't got it right, Hester. You with your—Billee."

It was that "its." Hester's round cheeks flamed.

"Oh, yes I have, Benny," she replied steadily. "Jink was dead?" she asked coldly.

"Roasted alive," Benny snarled. "The way his sort should be."

"And you found him lying where a dead mother was buried?"

"Yeah."

It was Grant who replied. And his easy drawl was accompanied by a smile of encouragement.

Husband and wife looked into each other's eyes. Hester sighed. And, presently, when she looked round at the man who was their life's friend, there was a flash of kindly mischief in her eyes.

"We won't need the police folk, Benny," she told him. "But what some folks need is to remember that God Almighty don't pack the dirt of a killer father on to the shoulders of an innocent, helpless bit of a poor sick kid. That's the low down of a mean man. And maybe woman, too. They breed good stock in Kentucky. Don't show me they breed mean. When Billee came to Grant and me we were looking for a man babe. But we didn't squeal. Well, it's a chance. And it looks like a slim one. But maybe Grant and me has got a man child now. He hasn't come the way a mother likes best. But it don't signify. Grant brought him. Grant laid him right here. And I'm thankful to the good God. He blessed me with a good man, and a big-hearted friend out of Kentucky, with the sort of kick to them to put over sixty miles of hill territory in five hours to save the life of a 'killer' halfbreed's innocent—whelp."

P A R T I I
Golden Grain

CHAPTER I

The "Firebug"

THE HORSE WAS CROPPING

the weedy mountain grass. The grass was interspersed with acrid lichens and mosses, and often overwhelmed by the hardiest of the heaths which found life still supportable. Despite its poorness of quality the horse realized necessity and persisted.

It was a big beast which carried an Indian saddle with dependent leggadros and double cinchas. Its bridle was plaited rawhide. And its skewbald coat was sadly unkempt. Two jetty black patches sprawled on one side of its body. On the other were smudges of rich bay. While a dappling of flea-bitten grey besmirched that which should have been gleaming white. Mane, tail, and forelock were of vivid sorrel, and completed a coat that was like to that of Joseph's.

It was, nevertheless, a satisfying beast. Its long, gracefully inclined pasterns suggested that it could "put them down" in no uncertain fashion. Its legs were as clean as though they had never been called upon to flog a sun-baked region that was without a trail. Its rounded barrel was heavily ribbed, leaving no more than a four fingers breadth between its last rib and the angular frame of quarters which were superbly "let down." In fact it was a creature to make strong appeal where toughness rather than beauty were esteemed.

Its head flung up. A pair of wistful eyes were full of startled enquiry.

The man's movement had been abrupt. He had stood up from his shelter under the lee of a boulder which had saved him from the bitterness of a knife-edged wind. He had been

squatting on haunches, smoking and far-gazing. He stood now, pondering.

It was high up in the hills and approaching the top of the world. The altitude was some thousands of feet, where the sun's most earnest effort could do no more than scorch the weed-like grass. It was that last lift of a dominating summit at the borderline of vegetation's life and death.

But it was no interest in scene or beauty that held the man pondering. The hill country was far too familiar to excite his emotions. He was just thinking. Thinking hotly. And floundering in a welter of mental impulse over which his control had become relaxed. He had taken hasty, even headlong decision. And he was formulating his plans for a sudden purpose.

He was slim. There was fine symmetry, youth and strength in every line of his figure. His spareness was natural in the Redman. He was clad in the beaded buskskin of a Blackfoot "brave." And, from the crown of a battered prairie-hat—a fashion borrowed from his white brother—to his moose-hide moccasins, he proclaimed the highest caste of Red ancestry.

His face was of uncommon native beauty. His brow was broad, and smooth, and finely modelled. So, too, were his youthful cheeks. There was classic aquilinity in a high-bridged nose with sensitive nostrils. And the flash of even white teeth parted well-formed lips.

But his expression was not good. His jet black eyes were unsteady. And the sun's reflection in them produced a savage smile of exulting as he leant his folded arms over the muzzle of an old-patterned Winchester rifle.

Yet in some subtle way he was dominant in that world of Nature's greatness. It was not his humanity. It was nothing of form, or grace of figure. It was in that which looked out of smouldering eyes that were never still, never steady. He was like some bird, or beast of prey, contemplating a defenceless victim.

Forest! It was a sea of forest from end to end down there

below. It was that magnificence of the primordial which is Nature's original garment. Unbroken, its dull hues flowed down, wave on wave of sadly depending foliage which looked to be tearfully mourning. It crowded in unbroken phalanx to the edge of a broad river draining the valley's bottom. And it garmented the opposite hillsides, to which purpling shades added distance and immensity.

It was dry. Tinder dry. And it was steeped in the resinous life-blood which coursed through its every vein.

The man abandoned his pondering. It was in a nervous gesture. His movement, as he turned from the scene of it all, had the same swift impulse which had brought him to his feet. He flashed an appraising glance to the westward where the alabaster of eternal snows reached up to a sunlit sky.

He found keen satisfaction. It was in those far glacial crests which now were swept clear of all cloud. He knew that a gale must be raging over that distant, dead world. And added confirmation of the fact was in the drive of vicious wind which lashed his cheeks, and flapped the loose brim of his hat.

His final question answered there was no more delay or hesitation. He moved back to his boulder and propped his rifle against it with careful regard for an ivory foresight. Then he set off down the hill at that stealing, bent-knee trot so characteristic of the Indian.

He left his skewbald comrade to its preoccupation without concern. They were bonded by intimate association. The horse would still be there whenever he returned. And he came to the wind-tortured trees which stood outpost for the forest legions below and behind them.

At once movement became slower. He was searching. And finally a heavily burdened figure was swallowed up by the soft gloom of shadowed aisles which had defied every assault of sunlight throughout the ages.

The horse continued its lean banquet while the minutes went by. A half hour passed. It prolonged to an hour. Still more time passed while the man remained hidden. But at

last he reappeared. And he came running. It was a startled horse that flung up a fiddle-head with a snort of apprehension.

There was a soothing word; the caressing touch of a controlling hand. The man had collected his rifle. He reached the trailing reins, flung them over the creature's head, and, setting one hand on the horn of the saddle, vaulted.

It was all in orderly haste. But very definitely it was haste. There was a rush. And nimble hoofs were clattering, picking their way over a sea of loose boulders. They made rapid descent of the hill. And the way of it was in the direction of the northern confines of the valley below.

It was like flight. An ordered retreat with fear, or danger, in hot pursuit. The horse was urged to a sure-footed gallop that was without care for the beast's legs. And the whole impulse of it was similar to that which the man had displayed in all his movements. There was, however, no fear in the eyes peering back over a shoulder at that which was left behind.

Smoke! Billows of it rising heavily. Separate patches at intervals along the line of the forest edge. The intervals embraced a wide front. And as the smoke cleared the tree-tops it was caught by the drive of furious wind and hurled away down over the sea of tinder dry foliage.

The man's eyes were shining. The excitement in them was something demented.

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The man had selected his site with care. It was a lofty plateau of barren rock that was without tree or weed, lichen or moss. It was a wide, out-thrusting platform glistening under showers of drenching spray that were flung up from the gorge of well-nigh abyssmal depth which it overhung. Somewhere below, seemingly lost in the bowels of the earth, a mountain torrent, in thundering cataract,

was pitching headlong in its race for the wide open of the valley lying beyond.

Horse and rider were mistily silhouetted against a bright skyline. They were poised at the plateau's extreme southern edge. And they were so still as to give the impression of some bizarre equestrian statue.

The skewbald's head was flung up under a tight, restraining rein. Its mulish ears were intently pricked forward. Distended nostrils were agush, and absorbing a reek that was impregnated with burning resin. But its usually mild eyes were wide with the sort of expression which threatened a deadly danger in view of their proximity to the seething cauldron of the cataract below.

The man on its back, however, seemed to be without any thought of the danger of his position. The plateau was an eyrie from which he could overlook the blazing world he had deliberately fired.

He was gazing out over a wide flung arena that was lost under a smoke pall rolling down its western slope. All Nature's peace was gone. Her beauty blinded. The wind was driving. And nothing much but smoke, and the stabs of flame licking up into it whenever its waves broke, was visible.

There was an unbroken rumble like distant thunder blending with the roar that came up from the cataract below. There were shattering detonations which were the explosive rivings of tortured tree trunks. There was a muffled booming telling of the downfall of splendid giants powerless against the destruction which was leaping upon them.

Then the life which was animate.

It was there arace in every direction, a never ending stream. A whole creature-world was seeking safety. A maddened throng fleeing at such speed as wing, and hoof, and the pads of fur could achieve. Every outlet of the forest was teeming. And the broad waters of a great river were

alive with a fugitive herd daring an unaccustomed element in its dire extremity.

A nightmare of terror had been loosed. A reasonless life was left with no hope beyond such speed as had been vouchsafed it. And the whole made a vision that was ecstasy to a mind beyond the borderline of sanity.

If earlier expression had revealed instability in the man's mental processes now they had passed beyond all semblance of control. Stark madness was driving. It was in the lighting of the smouldering eyes. It was in the frowning furrows of a smoothly youthful brow. It was in the swollen veins which corded forehead and temples. And in a breathing which came gustily. Then the expression of the hand gripping the "small" of his rifle. It was like a talon-clutch. The man's mind was without God or government.

Yet the madness of it was not without some sort of distorted purpose. The vision of consuming flames. The lurid joy of destruction and panic. These were foremost in the man's desire. And they were tangled with an absurd, childish anticipation as the wind-borne fire raced down to the broad water fire-break of the river which split valley and forest down their whole length.

He was waiting for just that thrill of insane excitement. What would happen when the fire reached the river bank to find its supply of fuel cut off? Would the wind bridge the gulf and hurl the flames into the forest beyond? Or would the flames just flap and flutter over the water and die of exhaustion?

It was a problem of tremendous importance to a mind reduced to the mentality of a child.

The approach of that climax wrought a fever of nerve tension. Its very rapidity aggravated. Every flash of leaping flame marked a step gained, and became a thing of vital meaning. The speed of the fire was terrific. It raced, stealing, leaping, devouring. There was no moment when vigil could be relaxed lest some savour at the moment of supreme desire should be missed.

Nearer. Nearer and nearer the flames approached the heels of the river's swimming horde. Closer they came to that belt of luxuriant growth which the river had set up to defend its banks against spring floods. Then, at last, it came in a blinding flash which seemed to sweep the smoke canopy from its path.

Flame shot up along the whole line of the river bank. Sheets of flame driving out and up high above the loftiest of the trees. It was momentary only. A vivid wall of flame licking out into void in gleaming helplessness.

There was a whistle of indrawn breath. There was sharp ejaculation. There was movement. And all were expressions of nerves beyond control. The man's rifle had gone up, reaching above his head and flourishing like a threatening bludgeon. It was urging the licking flames. Seeking to drive them on their destructive path by the sheer force of a crazy will.

A moment and a lip drew up in the savage snarl of some canine as the flames broke and fell back to gather fresh fury from the furnace behind them. Their first failure had exasperated. They came again. But their fury was less, and looked to be rapidly dying.

The man stood up in his stirrups. He shouted. He gesticulated impotently. He blasphemed with maniacal foulness.

Where the flames had failed him, however, wind and smoke were there to serve. The air was a veritable furnace of living fire. It was filled with myriads of flaming meteorites. And it flung them broadcast, hurling them deep into the defenceless heart of the ages-old tinder waiting to receive them beyond the river.

As the fresh conflagration started, and flame and smoke rolled on up the hillside, the madman's joy should have found extravagant expression. A burst of maniacal triumph looked to be the inevitable successor to uncontrolled rage and disappointment. But there was none.

The shouted blasphemy abruptly silenced. The bludgeoning rifle stilled. It fell to its place again across his knees as

the man dropped back into his saddle. The young body sagged helplessly with the weariness of complete exhaustion. And a long-drawn moan broke, which seemed to tell of the dregs of human despair.

It was a queer reaction. A perverted mind had planned. It had designed with cunning and gleefully executed. It had witnessed and revelled in fevered disorder. It had lived for a childish climax which had looked to be of supreme importance. It had witnessed the triumph of purpose.

Now that it had all passed it had left behind it a mind returned to balanced sanity and something more. It had left a youthful heart that was well nigh broken.

CHAPTER II

Transformation

FIFTEEN YEARS HAD witnesssed the complete obliteration of the cattle industry which had brought Calford into prosperous existence.

There was little mourning at its death, and no headstone had been set up to mark its grave. In those fifteen years the newborn child of wheat-raising had progressed miraculously. Northward, eastward, to the south and westward, deep into the foothills, countless sections of rich prairieland had come under rapid cultivation.

In consequence Calford found itself with a "good press," which, very properly, included its own. With becoming civic modesty Calford assured such world as elected to read that it was the most progressive city west of Winnipeg. And, realizing a unique and unusual sense of loyalty, the rest of the country's news-vehicles sang a supporting and flattering chorus.

The transformation of the almost limitless prairie lands was not, of course, complete. It would take many decades before their resources were fully engaged. Yet fifteen years had produced an impressive result. So much so, indeed, that Calford, as the heart of a growing industry, when reminded of its cattle days, writhed as though under insult. It indignantly pointed its wide-flung, and ever reaching-out streets and avenues. And it declared its wheat-mindedness and an abhorrence of a slur which denied its spirit of progress, and the leading position it had always occupied in the van of enterprise.

Benny Hyles and Grant Wilford had duly swum with the tide. The decisions arrived at on the porch of the ranch-house of the "Lazy S." had been put into execution with

characteristic energy, if with reluctance. They had assailed Calford's new-born grain market and earned for themselves a dominant position in it. They had become victims of the machine man as readily and wholly as if they liked it. Till, at last, the only cattle to be found feeding such sweet grass as their foothill valleys were permitted to grow were odds and ends of docile milk cows, and the splendid, sleek-coated stock of their stud farms.

For fifteen years an inconsolable Benny had nightly mourned over rye whisky with Grant cordially abetting him. And neither had yet discovered boredom in the reiteration of contemptuous disgust at the easy prosperity with which misfortune had overwhelmed them!

Though the old cattle brands of the "Lazy S." and Benny's "V.D." were no longer sought on the spring and fall round-ups amongst the hills, they survived as household words on the country side. But it was with a new meaning. Calford afforded them the greatest civic respect as producers of the finest, hardest wheat which found its way upon its market.

In fifteen years the changes in the lives of Benny Hyles and Grant was a commonplace story of human progress and achievement, except that the machinery of it all was unusually well oiled.

Grant Wilford knew the only disaster which overshadowed the lives of either. Death robbed him of the woman who had been his great inspiration. And he knew all the deeps of man's desolation. But Hester had fulfilled her mission. She had left him with a daughter, and a foster son in the waif, Nick Woodley, and thereby lightened for him the burden of her passing.

Grant continued on his man's high road. And, in due course, he came to its milestones.

A glorious Billee, with red gold hair, and deep, violet eyes alight with youthful understanding came back to him from the most expensive education which money could buy

her. Sophisticated, maybe. But still the child of the hills she always had been. She came to it all again thrilling with enthusiasm at the sight of a valley golden with growing grain. While her young soul was completely enraptured with the high life of the creatures peopling a well-nigh-perfect racing stud farm.

Forthwith she elected herself her father's chief lieutenant with a special mission for the glorious bloodstock under the charge of Alan Grain, the red-headed mentor "Seeds" of her early days.

Hester's desires for the child, Nick Woodley, had been loyally carried out. He had had every advantage which money could afford him. And he, too, returned to the hills of his origin to take his place in the well-laid schemes of the "Lazy S."

Then had come the completion of a mother's further planning. It was the transformation of the old Blacktail Valley homestead. Its replacement by a sumptuous modern country house which should be a right setting, a suitable background, for the young lives which had meant so much to her.

The story of Benny Hyles had much similarity. But it was with the one happy variation that he had had to endure no parting from the woman who had blessed him with his big son, and spent her years in mothering the father as well as his child. She still persisted at a helm that needed her. And her wise eyes watched with quiet content the precious harmony prevailing between two men as opposite as the poles.

Rodney had grown to a manhood which reflected little of an explosive and reactionary father. He was big. He had no great claims to good looks. But at twenty-seven he had acquired a sound appreciation of the material things of life, which, in spite of all lofty denial, he deemed to be the things which seriously mattered in a completely material world. He was frankly determined in affairs. And in his

determination he intended to become no laggard in the general scramble of life. He had all his mother's shrewd humour and undemonstrative force.

That which he discovered on his return home, with his colt years of college completed, was irresistible to his humour, and provided him with inspiration. He found a disgruntled but busy father battling with a veritable sea of wheat much in the manner of a patient forced to obey his doctor's orders. He found, too, a grim spectre, which was Live Oak, greyer, older, but otherwise unchanged, blasphemously assisting him to the limits of an extravagant capacity for continuous labour. Both were men of great force and colossal industry, but with hearts and minds far adrift of their newer calling. And therein lay his inspiration.

He loved the team of them more than ever for the manner in which they outraged their every feeling. For the way in which they sought to adapt the brains of skilled cattle-men to the quasi-scientific calling they both cordially detested and despised. And he knew that he had arrived at the psychological moment. Their every mood and action proclaimed an S.O.S. which he read unfailingly. He formulated his plans and sought his keenly understanding mother.

The result was suspiciously magical. And Rodney understood. He knew he had been ground-baited by those who had founded their hopes on him.

Practically he was raw. Scientifically he was full of the knowledge of wheat growing which his college course had supplied. So, his purpose clear in his mind, he was utterly undismayed when the citadel was abandoned, and his father, with stupendous alacrity, ceded him charge of his farm lands and all the hated grain growing thereon.

It took Rodney only a few short months to prove his worth. An eager father and a prideful mother looked on and congratulated each other. It was all swift, keen, youthful reorganization. The boy had taken hold of the improvised

foundations which had served. And he was remodelling and building upon them.

Live Oak was promptly removed from the iron seat of machinery and returned to the leather whereon he was at his forceful best. He was given charge of the stud farm. And wheat finally passed out of his life. Then came the buildings which had grown up as circumstance had forced upon the impulsive Benny. And, within a year, Valley Deep was modernized out of all recognition, and competently manned by really experienced men of grain.

The whole thing was an expression of energy and confidence. Rodney made mistakes, as he was bound to do. But, as swiftly as they were made they were realized and remedied. And none of them was made a second time. He laboured on well-considered lines, with one eye for his balance sheet, and the other for the remoter future of his industry. And at all times both his eyes were for the two beloved creatures who had provided him with a vineyard in which to labour for his penny.

The mother was overjoyed and missed none of the happiness her grown son had brought into her life. And Benny, a turbulent volcano on the verge of violent eruption, became soothed to a benign and marvelling simmer by the sort of consultative deference to which the big youth never failed to treat him.

Thus Benny found himself left to continue his process of accumulating lusty years, and the nursing of a treasured thirst. He found looking on, approving, admiring, to be things for which he was peculiarly adapted. For they left him with a wide breadth of leisure in which to cultivate restful contentment. In fact he found himself with so much contentment on his hands that he scarcely knew how to dispose of it all.

But the most staggering thing of all, which left Benny with perennial amazement and incredulity, was the fact that he—he—Benny Hyles, a cattleman of historic recklessness —had achieved a son who not only knew wheat but liked

it! That he had begotten a youth whose complete understanding of balance sheets was that they should be full to overflowing of—profits!

The magnificence of the prospect before him reduced Benny to an attitude of mind bordering on the reverent. So much so that on one occasion, on a Saturday, after a long poker-sitting at Mathersbee's in Blacktail, his mood nearly gained the upper hand of his judgment.

His game was finished. And for some unexplained reason his liquor had lost its interest. On a sudden impulse, he nearly decided to stop over till Sunday morning to listen to a celebrated preacher who had recklessly descended upon a wholly ungrateful township. But he was saved in his moment of peril by the call of friendship. And the ride out to the "Lazy S." restored his thirst and cleared his judgment.

It was the same night on the porch, in company with a greying Grant Wilford. The time was somewhere subsequent to Benny's "eighth." The Kentuckian felt himself impelled. And he leant across the table which separated them, and directed an admonishing finger at the exact spot where he hoped his unvocal friend and his rocker chair would finally come to rest.

"Just set around and don't get restless, Gran, old friend," he appealed. "Guess I got to tell you so you'll get it right. There's boys who get it all ways all the time. And," he added impressively, "I guess I'm one of 'em. There's no figgering the way of merricles. I'd say they just happen along without any sense. Maybe it 'ud be understandable if I was one of them pie-mush eaters that sets a Bible where a boy best pouch his gun. Seems like the only good works I ever done is the rustlers I've strung by the neck. And the darn nigger or so I've man-handled for acting dirt by white gals 'way back in my home town. Can't think of much else to set God Almighty feeling good about me. But there it is. Merricles? Gee! Ther's folks guess it's a hell of a gamble falling for matri—for the wife racket." He shook his head and beamed liquid satisfaction. "I want to tell

the whole darn world that the wife who can push a button that rings a go-getter like our Roddy into the world ain't even a spec'lation. No, sir. She's just the almighty swellest gilt-edged investment since ol' man Solomon shook a whisker at Ma Sheba."

The rocker tilted as Grant pushed the bottle in the direction of the out-reaching hand.

"Sure, Benny," he drawled in pensive agreement.

And the last of it was drowned in the splash in Benny's glass.

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Live Oak's horse ambled up to the porch of the ranch-house, which was the last relic of cattle days in Valley Deep. The man was leading another horse ready saddled. It was for Rodney who was awaiting him.

The years had in no way improved Live Oak. Nor had his general presentment suffered to any great extent. Probably it was incapable of further detriment. There was the thinning and greying of the lank black hair festooning a neck whose condition expressed something of the man's aversion to water in any form. And his whisker was comparatively clean-shaven to reveal a few fleshy strings under a truculently thrusting chin. Otherwise an emaciated personality had the cast-iron resistance to time of a graven image. He still wore his leather chaps, though he had fallen for cotton to replace his buckskin shirt. But then he was still the hard-case old-timer although promoted to the care of race horses.

It was dawn. It was coolly delicious with mountain sweetness. The last shades of night were still lurking in the rich-hued woods clothing the lofty sweep of the valley slopes. And Rodney Hyles bestirred from his leaning against one of the porch's roof supports as Live Oak came up to it. Rodney's plain features were lit by a whimsical smile.

"Gosh, Live Oak," he expositured. "You certainly were

raised where they grow niggers. The heart of a rusty tractor, I'd say. I need bushels of sleep as well as wheat. And you won't leave me to it. Coppermine's got a bunch of my sympathy being turned out with the night air unthawed."

It was the sort of thing Live Oak looked for in Rodney, whom he felt he had helped to raise. And his rasping retort came as roughly as though he resented that which he probably enjoyed most in the world.

"Don't need no heart when you're dealin' with hosses, Roddy, boy. Only sense. It's July. An' I ain't stooin' Coppermine's guts when sun's up."

There was abstraction in the man's mournfully sunken eyes. And he flung out a long, brown arm, with its leather wristlet pointing northwards up the valley.

"Still afire!" he snarled, as though blaming his companion.

Followed a few moments of significant silence. Rodney gazed out in the direction indicated. There was disquiet in his searching eyes. There was a mild irritation at Live Oak's persistent harp on a threat of which he was fully aware. It was the seep of smoke from a far distant forest fire. It had made itself apparent two days earlier. And with upwards of three thousand acres of ripening wheat in his responsibility Rodney felt akin to the market woman who entrusts one basket with the burden of her complete stock of eggs.

"Still burning," he nodded agreement at last. "Guess we won't be clear of it for weeks. I wonder how—why?"

Live Oak's reply was characteristically instant. He snorted. And he spat a contemptuous stream of tobacco juice. It was unaccompanied by anything verbal.

Rodney took his horse and lifted his big, active body into the saddle. They rode off down the hill to the valley bottom, where their way lay beside the meandering river which was bounded on both sides by a whispering sea of yellowing wheat.

"You've put Abie up, I guess?" Rodney enquired as they urged their horses, and loped southwards.

"Why, sure. Ther' ain't no one but young Abie Klas to handle Coppermine right. That bum ain't two cents o' use to him 'cept' to ride. If ther's an ounce o' kick packed away in Coppermine's guts that hell's get 'll locate it an' spread it over the track. Abie's crazy to set the Calford Cup on your Ma's cheefoneer."

"And you reckon he'll put it over?"

"He surely will!"

Live Oak's threat was accompanied by an ugly clamping of his jaws.

Rodney smiled out over his wheat, which rustled in heavy ear away to the southern confines of the valley. Live Oak followed up his threat by spitting over his sorrel's shoulder.

"Ther' ain't a thing that colt won't put over," he purred. "My kick is we ain't 'way back home so he could pick up the Kentucky Derby. Say, Roddy boy," mused reflectively, "guess I ain't wise to the way it works down through hoss meat, but there's folks reckons once in awhile ther's a straight throw-back. Wal, it's Coppermine. He's Kentucky Kid clear through. Colour, shape, size, temper—an' his stayin'. He's dropped his gran' dam clear out of his blood. He's the Kid. An' I'm packin' a year's wage, an' the best loan you'll make me, to clean up them darn Calford pools."

Rodney laughed sheer joy at the man's gloomy enthusiasm.

"That's old Kentucky," he cried. "Everything to the tail end of your mouldy shirt, Live Oak, eh? Fine! You just need to make that loan big enough and you'll get it. We want that Cup. Benny's crazy for it. Ma's crazy for it. And if we don't pull it I'm after you with a brace of guns bigger and quicker than your own. But don't bid those pools too high. There's always Billee's Iron Bolt with all sorts of British race track blood in its veins. Then you never can guess

what young Nick Woodley's got hidden away somewhere in the hills. We're all friends. A bunch of the best. But you need to get it war's just a play game to the sort of thing we're all ready to put over for the Calford Cup. We know Iron Bolt. But don't forget young Nick's in the game, too."

Rodney shook a doubting head. And Live Oak flashed a sidelong glance.

"He surely is," he agreed. And the way of it was not pleasant.

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Mosquito Bottom was a wide flat which had been salved from the wheat hunger which had overtaken the valley. It was still rich sweet-grass at the far limit of the valley, which closed about it in the way of the foothills. It sheltered under wooded slopes. And two sides of it were protected by the bank of the river flowing southwards. It was nearly five miles south of the ranchhouse.

It was as though Nature had set it there for its present purpose. For it was dead level. And its top-rail fence encircled a race-track that was duly laid out, smoothly rolled, and hay-mown to the thick grass pile of a rich carpet.

The two horsemen crossed the floating log bridge and entered the enclosure by the loose-rail gateway. They moved over to a central position whence they had full view of the two mile oval track, and the string of sheeted horses, and their riders, at walking exercise over by the forest backing coming down the hill slope.

Coppermine was leading the string. And even under his sheet there was something to mark him out as a colt apart from the rest. He was, of course, a big golden chestnut without blaze or socks. But it was not those things. The beast had an air. A something prideful air suggesting consciousness of its qualities.

The sight of the horses seemed to have a preoccupying

effect on the ranchman. And Rodney roused him with a question.

"How much are you asking him?" he enquired, with a nod across at the leader.

"If them darn balances don't lie he's packing dead weight lead to give the bunch twenty-eight pounds and a licking over the Cup distance."

It rasped as though spoken in defiance.

"You're crazy, Live Oak!" Rodney shrugged his massive shoulders. "There's nothing living that can give Jade Green that weight. And you've got Stringer up on her."

Live Oak's jaws masticated. He considered the horses. Then he rolled his mournful eyes.

"Only Coppermine. He's goin' to lick that bunch, with Jade Green, the way he'll lick Iron Bolt and the game young Nick's playin' or I don't know Mathersbee's likker from snow-water."

Rodney saw the light in the deeps of the man's sunken eyes and understood. Despite his grim mask Live Oak was truly, weakly human.

"Look at him," the man went on. "Sixteen hands of Kentucky Kid without no fault. That blamed hoss 'll walk home with your Cup. We'll just send him over the track for you to see, Roddy, boy. An' we ain't needin' the clock neither. He's Coppermine."

Live Oak flung up a long, bare, brown arm and semaphored to the men with the horses.

Rodney had no further protest. And queerly enough his chief interest was not for the splendid Coppermine, despite his ardent desire for the Calford Cup. It was this old ranchman tough who was the ruffian friend of his whole life. In those moments he felt that Coppermine's failure would break a heart that would normally need to be crushed under a sledge-hammer.

The sheets were removed, and Jade Green's knee boots were discarded. The horses crowded back beyond a point

where one of the stable hands was standing afoot. Every one of the eight was a golden beauty with the rich blood of a common ancestry. And all but Coppermine wore blazes and white socks.

Rodney watched Live Oak from the tail of an eye. And he smiled at the man's leaning intentness. Live Oak was crouching over the horn of his saddle. And his masticating jaws were never so busy.

"If that boy don't get 'em a right start I'll kill him so his folks won't ever rec'nise wots left over," Live Oak snarled viciously.

Rodney grinned.

"The sort of start won't worry Coppermine," he teased. Live Oak's retort flashed.

"An' that's the swellest truth you've spoke in years. Christ! He's got 'em right! Away!"

It was the full of a wide-brimmed, black prairie hat. And it went down accompanied by an unconventional shout that came back off the hill slope. There was a golden bunch of horse flesh racing with Coppermine well lasted!

In that first moment Rodney forgot the man beside him. He forgot everything but the fact that the great Coppermine was sulking instead of racing. That was his first impression. But it passed almost as it came. It was the boy, Abie Klas. He was sitting down and pulling. Coppermine was not sulking. The great beast was fighting for its splendid head with a rider determined not to yield it.

Rodney pointed excitedly.

"Hell!" he cried at Live Oak. "What's he monkeying at? The boy's pulling the heart right out of him."

"An' if he don't go right on pulling till he makes the big bend I'll lick the hide off'n him with his own darn quirt."

Rodney gave it up. Live Oak was a law to himself and his stables. He was asking the impossible, surely. Twenty-eight pounds! And pulling Coppermine while the field got away. He gave himself up to simple watching with a

feeling that Live Oak's methods were hopeless for his understanding.

But that which he beheld filled him with sudden marvel. Abie pulled till the horses ahead of him swung to the bend, with Jade Green an easy leader. Then the boy sat up. And he began to ride. There was just a moment of furious thrill as the big horse's daisy-cutting gait lengthened to yield an incredible spectacle. Before the last horse had swung on the bend Coppermine was right on its tail.

For a few more moments Rodney endured the thrill of it. Then he drew a deep breath of satisfaction. As the bend was taken Coppermine moved up amongst the driven horses like some steam locomotive gathering way on a downhill grade. It was over. And Rodney knew it. And he abandoned watch on the horses for the man beside him.

"Looks like he's all you said with a bit to spare," he cried. "There's only him and Jade Green in it."

Live Oak turned his horse facing the end of the big bend where the straight began. Jade Green was still leading with Coppermine half a length away. As he watched that half length lessened.

"Only him, Roddy, boy," he demurred. "Watch!"

Jade Green's blaze faced up the straight. And Coppermine swung out at the bend for a clear run. Then he came. Came with the rush of a new-fired rocket. It was a giant spurning pygmies. And Live Oak muttered.

"Coppermine!" he rasped. "Got the name wrong, I guess. Gold! Goldmine. Sure. It's the ghost of the Kid come back to lift that darn ol' Cup."

Then he stood up in his stirrups and shouted with all his rough, stirred soul behind his words.

"Come right away, you hell's get!" he bellowed. "Give him your quirt, Abie, an' show the guts to him. Pass it him, or I'll pass it you."

Abie's quirt fell. It was a spark firing a powder train. Coppermine swept past the finish with Jade Green tailed off lengths away.

CHAPTER III

Live Oak's Bogey

RODNEY AND LIVE OAK WERE waiting at the loose-rail gateway watching the string of sheeted horses as they passed out on their way back to quarters. Larry Stringer, whom the valley knew as "Ropes," led the procession on Jade Green. Abie Klas brought up the rear on Coppermine.

Somehow the cattleman's moment of enthusiasm had become lost in a welter of gloom. Rodney on the other hand was still thrilled by a performance which had convinced him beyond any peradventure.

Coppermine approached the gateway well on his toes. And Abie's hands were kept firmly down on him. Abie was clearly not white. It would have been difficult to place his origin. There were those who saw negro blood in his black eyes and somewhat woolly hair. And in his crumpled, and artificially good-natured grin. Others talked of an ancestry belonging to the far north, where a mixture of Eskimo and white might be found. Live Oak, however, had no uncertainty. In his uncompromising fashion he pronounced the man "Dago" with all the contemptuous implication of the term.

Rodney nodded approval as the big horse came abreast. And he received a grinning response.

"Swell handling, Abie," he said. "Looks like a cinch. The Cup. Guess you and Coppermine fit."

Abie's quick eyes had simian coldness despite his grin.

"He win, yes," he replied coolly. "Mabbe."

Rodney's goodwill somewhat damped. It was the tone. The manner.

"What d'you mean—precisely?" he asked sharply, feeling Abie's ugliness was not confined to feature.

Abie's rounded shoulders lifted, while, with masterly control, he checked the colt's impatience to join its companions.

"Him run lak hell. Oh, yes. Mabbe," he said, slanting a cunning eye. "Samelak this day. Mabbe not, too. No can tell, this feller. Crazy fish. Yes."

It was Live Oak who replied. And in no easy fashion.

"He'll run *lak* hell when the gate goes up," he barked threateningly. "Ef he don't ther's a rawhide waitin' to know the darn reason. An' it won't be fer him. Savvy? You get that good. An' beat it right along with them others. You'll fix the colt before you quit t'eat. Then you'll get a hunch. Ther' ain't no suckers around dopin' that easy money you got in your nightmare."

There was impish wickedness in Abie's sidelong glance. But he obeyed with the sort of alacrity which bespoke real fear.

Rodney looked after horse and rider with a frown of distaste.

"Bit of a rat—that," he said.

Live Oak watched the colt on to the floating bridge. He watched him to the far side of the river. Then his reply snapped with a shrug of lean shoulders.

"Louse from hell's blanket," he said.

"Yet you're putting him up for the Cup?"

Live Oak's gloom passed. It was replaced by a look that suggested derision. His eyes narrowed shrewdly.

"Ye-p!" he drawled.

Rodney laughed out of his understanding of his boyhood's companion. That tone. He knew it. He remembered it as far back as he could remember anything. Live Oak was at his deadliest when blasphemy yielded to unemotional calm.

The cavernous eyes turned northward as though drawn by a lodestone. Rodney grinned.

"You've played your card," he said. "Better turn the trick. I'm going along over to those winter oats we're cutting to-morrow. We can talk as we go?"

There was not the slightest relaxing of Live Oak's concentrated search of the northern distance. He merely lifted his reins.

"Sure, Roddy, boy," he agreed abstractedly.

Beyond the floating bridge their way lay over another accommodation trail giving access to further oceans of wheat almost ready for harvest. As the sea of it enveloped them there was the quintessence of derogation in the manner in which Live Oak spat over his horse's shoulder.

The July sun had risen clear above the eastern hill-tops. Never had it shone with more complete ecstasy. Its heat robbed the air of its mountain crispness, and set the shoulders and flanks of the horses streaming sweat. Myriads of mosquitoes and black flies had leapt to active assault. And Live Oak smeared a hand across the back of a sun-scorched neck. The result was a nasty mess of his own blood and crushed mosquitoes. And he wiped it on the thigh of his leather chaps.

Rodney watched the sickening operation with easy humour.

"You've shown me Coppermine can run for his life, or anything else. What's the big idea back of it?" he asked. "The show, I mean," he added.

Live Oak chewed thoughtfully. There was earnest conviction in the savage assault of his teeth. He slowed his horse to an amble. And Rodney's kept pace with it.

"I'm scared, Roddy! Scared so bad my guts is sick with it!" he said at last.

It came harshly, and without preamble. Live Oak's eyes were far-gazing in the way of seeing ugly visions.

"Say," he went on, "ther' ain't human or devil to hand me worry, mostly. Can't mind the time ther' ever was. But Coppermine! I'm jest scared sick fer the swellest hoss-flesh ever danced on four legs."

"Go on. Tell me. And I'll listen. I owe you quite that after such a show."

And Rodney grinned.

Live Oak's dark head moved in the slow fashion of a deliberate negative.

"You got it wrong," he denied. "'Tain't me you owe. 'Tain't anybody. But—Coppermine."

Rodney gazed out northward, too.

"That fire," he said.

"Them fires."

Live Oak left the correction to sink in.

Rodney knew well enough that for four years the hills had been cursed with a series of sporadic fires. Forest fires. Any one of which might have had no limits to its devastation. They lit up in a definite region. A region that knew comparatively narrow limits. It was an area of some one hundred to one hundred and fifty miles to the north and west of them. And each had been a potential threat to their own valley's industry and life.

They had all watched them. They had speculated. And one and all in Valley Deep had known serious apprehension. They had considered together and debated possible cause and consequence. And in each there had been the lurking suspicion of the unaccountable. Live Oak had always threatened disaster without mincing words. Benny had raged explosively and pondered extravagant action. Rodney had offered practical suggestions of comprehensive fire breaks.

But the human nature of it all had supervened. With the passing, and final extinguishing of each fire by natural processes, there had been the reaction of relief. Fire breaks, such as were needed in the vast forest tracts clothing the valley slopes, were a matter of tremendous cost and labour. So they had remained uncut. And the farm buildings, and the broad grain lands, still knew crowding by spruce and pine, and all the desperately inflammable materials which made up the aged hill-forests.

But the stud farm had at last produced a horse of classic qualities. It had bred Coppermine. And Coppermine's initial feat on the race-track was to be the winning of the Calford Cup this fall. It was a matter of supreme importance in a community which regarded sport as paramount. Besides, Coppermine was Live Oak's most treasured responsibility.

"Have it your own way," Rodney conceded seriously enough. "Plural, or anything else. What about 'em?"

"We've guessed years," Live Oak reflected. "Guessed storm. Figgered Injuns on huntin' pass an' sech. Then that darn 'spontan'us combuschion' junk." He cut a lean hand across the air. "Injuns don't fire their darn huntin' grounds. An' I want to say right here that spontan'us combuschion wouldn't get away with a newborn babe. God A'mighty ain't any sort o' lousy firebug."

Live Oak's smouldering eyes sought and found the steady blue of Rodney's.

"He ain't never set out no patch an' said to Hisself, 'Ef I fire that bunch o' stuff I'll worry that pore darn sap, Benny Hyles, so he'll get chasin' wings and halos an' things.' He ain't no sort o' blackmailin' shyster that way. An' He don't never grow them trees for years an' years so He ken fire 'em jest to hand Hisself a swell laff. Them trees is like your bum wheat. He wouldn't get no more laff out o' firin' 'em than you would settin' a lucifer to windward at harvest time. I tell you God A'mighty ain't no firebug. But ther's firebugs at work—sure."

"The same old grief. You're a persistent pirate, Live Oak," Rodney grinned.

Live Oak spat.

"Gotta be," he snapped. "You'se folk argufies. I knows."

"How? What do you know?" Rodney asked sharply.

But the cattleman evaded.

"Say! You're needin' that Cup set right on your Ma's cheefoneer. You an' Benny reckons that Cup's to tell the world of Coppermine, an' the sort o' hosses these darn hills

can breed. So you want that Cup. And I mean to pull it for you. Coppermine 'll pick it up same as if the rest of 'em was just bum cow-hosses. But he'll need to be there when that gate goes up. He'll need to make Calford for that race. An' he'll need to pass them judge's box first."

There was a sweeping gesture which terminated in a claw-like hand reaching the bulge of a hip pocket. Live Oak bit deeply into his massive tobacco plug. And he gloomed as he ate afresh.

"And what's to prevent him?" Rodney enquired sharply.

"Fire!"

It snapped viciously.

"The sort o' fire that won't leave no harvest to notice. An' won't leave no Coppermine over."

The horses continued their amble undisturbed by the threat to their aristocratic stable companion. They just went on warring, with shaking heads and swishing tails, against the winged torture of their lives. Live Oak was again looking out northward. Rodney was considering golden grain. Suddenly Rodney flashed round on his companion.

"But why? In God's name why?" he demanded hotly. "It's all so rotten. So insane. Allow firebugs. After four years of crazy fires I guess we must. But Coppermine. The Calford Cup. Why, why, why! I'll never believe there's dirt enough in human nature to burn out a poor dumb colt like Coppermine."

"You wouldn't."

Live Oak shook a gloomy head.

"You've growed a swell farmer, Roddy, boy, tho' you was raised to cattle same as us," he went on. "You're smart. Slick on figgers an' sech-like. Guess you got all them smart guys down on the prairies licked sky high when it comes to pilin' your pa's bank roll. But you're jest a clean kid wot can't think dirt. You're still that big babe us folk all helped to raise. You heard Abie, an' you guessed he was a rat. They all are around a race-track."

"You need to get it the 'hand' we drawed when Coppermine was foaled was the sort that sets every darn racin' sharp crazy with meanness," he went on, warming to his task. "You've see the way he puts 'em down. I've saddle-broke him and rode him from two year old up. I guess I know every darn thing that hoss can tell me. And every hobo from here to Calford knows he's about the greatest proposition since Kentucky Kid. If all the folks know—"

His gesture was eloquent.

"Do you get it?" He stabbed with a pointing finger. "If Coppermine don't come under that startin' gate Missie Billee's Iron Bolt wins!"

"Cut that!" It came hotly. Rodney's eyes flamed. "If you—"

But Live Oak broke in on the instant.

"Don't say it, Roddy, boy. You don't have to get hot. Ther ain't no need. Our Billee gal's the dandiest, straight-eyed sport ever wore a race jacket. She's the same clean kid like you. But," he added doggedly, "if Coppermine don't jump off the mark for that darn Cup the Bolt hoss wins."

They had come to the fringe of the winter oats. And Live Oak reined up. Rodney passed a hand up to his fair head and thrust back his battered hat in a gesture of perplexity.

"There's no sort of doubt of that. There's nothing else in the race. But you're wrong. You must be. I can't believe in that bogey of yours. Who? For God's sake! It's just— unthinkable."

"Is it?"

The cynical scorn of it was withering.

"Guess I ain't never missed a race-track since ever I used to steal the cents from my old mother to pass me in," Live Oak went on expansively. "I've played the pools like every darn sucker plays the Wall Street markets. I've see all the truck a race-track can show a boy with two quick eyes. An' I'll tell the world you couldn't muck out the dirt lyin'

around it ef you was to set a posse of Archbishops knee-scrubbin' it. Ther's folks got the sass to claim as God A'mighty built us folk like Hisself. But ef the race-track bunch looks like Him then I sure guess Heaven ain't the location a right cattleman needs to yearn for. No, sir. Not on your life. Guess He built dandy hoss-flesh an' swell steers an' sech-like innercent saps as don't know better than to feed grass. But Hell fenced the lousy race-track an' packed it full of its garbage."

It was an unequal contest and Rodney abandoned it.

"You win, Live Oak," he said, and grinned. "That scare of your's is real. But you can forget those frills you designed for me. When it comes to Coppermine and the Calford Cup I'm no babe. And I'm not very clean. Guess I'm the same garbage with those others. You've got to win that Cup if you ham-string Iron Bolt and every other darn horse in the race. What are you going to do about it?"

"Set that Cup right on your Ma's cheefoneer!"

The blaze of July heat left the two men quite unaffected. They just sat there on their drooping horses while they talked on. But it was mainly Live Oak's talk. He told graphically. He planned. He argued with imaginary objections. He spurned every argument Rodney did not offer. And gradually his growing flow of lurid blasphemy indicated satisfaction. The man finally talked himself completely from under the shadow of his bogey.

It came to its end. There was a muted moment. Then Rodney laughed.

"You'll finish at the end of a rawhide on the bough of your namesake," he cried. "That is if someone doesn't consider common homicide less fussy." Then his gaze passed soberly to the distant smoke haze. "But, man, I hope and believe you're wrong," he said earnestly. "We're thinking Coppermine. We're talking Coppermine. But do you get the thing it means if any firebug starts on the woods of this valley. Benny's life's work wrecked. Yours, too. My mother's home washed clean out. The home she loves.

Think of your stud. The barns. The mares. Your young stock. I won't ask you to think of my wheat. It appals me! If you're right, there's more, much more to this than any—Coppermine. Ruin! Just the ghastly ruin of a lifetime's work."

Live Oak chewed in silence. Then in awhile he shook his head, and the complete fatalist looked out of his eyes. It was the man who sees life from hand to mouth.

"Tain't good thinkin' that way, Roddy, boy," he pondered heavily. "Things is, or they ain't. Jest wait. An' think when you gotta act. That way it sets snap into it. Them things you said ain't wuss'n that tornado that blew me an' Benny sky high back home 'fore you was born. We can build fer your dandy Ma agin. I got sweller plans fer the hosses. Standin' grain makes right food fer next year's crop ef you burn it. But you can't fix a live Coppermine out of the junk of a dead hoss."

Rodney laughed shortly.

"Well you've made me see things against my best sense," he said, "so there's nothing for it but to sit in at the game and play it the best we know. We'll leave it that way and I'll get along to that breakfast I haven't had. I'm making Calford by noon."

Live Oak bestirred from the reflective gloom which had engulfed him.

"Makin' Calford?" he questioned with unnecessary sharpness.

Rodney's firm lips quirked.

"Why, yes. And you'll hate it," he said, with a mischievous grin. "It's that road contract. I'm through with a trail made by the hammer of horses' hoofs. Through with horse traffic from here to Calford. It's uneconomic in these days of quick markets. No more double-bobs and half-spring wagons hauling grain. I've ordered a fleet of six ton lorries. And when that road's graded from here over to the Blacktail next spring, I won't have to leave my new auto-

mobile over with Billee so I can keep its back axle whole. I'm signing the contract noon to-day."

Live Oak spat. And Rodney went on with twinkling eyes.

"Some day I'll get you and Benny grain-minded. Then there'll be no stopping our V.D. enterprise. But just now there's things doing that may cut across us unpleasantly. And it's Europe. Some sort of unholy kick up. They say war. But I don't know. Haven't the rights of it yet. It's the Germans. You know you can't tell with war. Might just as easily shoot us to bits as set our stock sky high. Even though it's thousands of miles away and we've nothing to do with it."

But Live Oak dismissed the matter with cold indifference.

"Squareheads!" he scorned. "Souse lagger 'stead of eatin' likker short. Don't signify—them. But maybe you'll pick up word o' that fire from Nick Woodley. Boys reckon it hunted him home from them hills he was shootin' up."

"Nick back home from the hills?" Rodney was frankly astonished.

"Sure." Live Oak considered the distance reflectively. "Boys see him in Blacktail last night. Settin' in at Mathersbee's game. See him push a thousand bucks to fatten a jackpot fer Doc Myer to pull in. An' the sight made 'em want to cry like kids. Don't never get no chanct like that—the boys. Doc an' Mathersbee looks to that. Can't just think how a killer like Jink ever got a kid with no more sense than to eat Mathersbee's likker like he likes it. And to feed them sharps Gran Wilford's dollars same as if he was shuckin' peas. Clear bug!"

CHAPTER IV

Youth at the Helm

RODNEY PARTED FROM THE cattleman with Live Oak bound for some destination unstated. It lay in the direction whence they had come. And Rodney surmised Coppermine's luxurious quarters.

He watched the man's meditative going. The straight, slim, sinewy body, and the straight-legged seat on an ancient saddle. The sight gave him pleasure. There was not alone friendliness in Rodney's gaze. There was admiration for one of the finest horsemen the prairies had ever bred, and for the shrewd perception of an untutored mind, and an amazing tenacity of purpose.

Live Oak was no "hired-man" to Rodney and his father and mother. He claimed a wage as did Ropes and Abie and the rest of them. But Live Oak was as much a part of their life as was the grain they grew, and the descendants of the famous Copper Jade they had bred.

To Rodney he was even more than that. He was a sort of raw, friendly leaning-post which supported him while adapting studied theory to practice. Live Oak's horizon might be bounded by the top rail of a branding pinch. But, at least, his foreground was littered with the uncut jewels of wide experience where man seeks Nature's favours.

Just now Live Oak had furnished Rodney with so much material for serious reflection that he hardly knew where to start his ponderings. For the first time in his life he had witnessed Live Oak caught in a sort of spiritual panic. And somehow the sight of it had convinced him far more surely than any argument. Rodney knew for sure that the splen-

did beast he had watched overwhelm its stable companions under penal weight was in real danger.

Live Oak vanished over an horizon of rustling wheat. And Rodney came back to actualities. He turned his horse and headed up the valley questing his long delayed breakfast.

Benny and his mother were awaiting him on the porch of the ranch house.

Benny looked to be collapsed in the deep seat of a steadily swaying rocker. His mother was standing. A smiling figure of imposing shapeliness, clad in a tastefully modish morning gown. Rodney warmed to a pair whose queer ill-assortment never failed to stir his amusement. His mother belonged to a social world which had nothing to do with the rough hill country of the West. Benny, of course, was just Benny. And he would have had him no otherwise.

It was his mother's greeting that hailed his approach.

"How's that wretched infant of Live Oak's?" she smiled. "A tiresome creature that turns you out in the middle of the night. Is it still wrapped in cotton packing? Or do we frame it in jewels? Maidie's telling the world. She declares that 'only fool women make corn-cakes for ungrateful men to spoil sitting in late to eat them.' "

Rodney flung his big body out of the saddle. He hitched his horse to the tie-post and eased the cinchas of his saddle. Then, with a laugh, he stepped up on to the porch and implanted a matutinal embrace on the comely, rounded cheek that was not quite innocent of powder.

The smile in Sarah's blue eyes was warmly infectious. It was brimful of that happy feminine tolerance which made it a joy in the lives of her men-folk.

"Early or late I guess Maidie's corn-cakes fit me fine," Rodney laughed. And he turned to the pathetically huddled figure in the rocker. "Eaten, sir?" he enquired mischievously.

"Hell! No! Who wants t'eat?"

There was a momentary flash of storm in Benny's eyes. Then the dark of them was hidden as though he had reached his last earthly moment. But the natural humour of the man would not be denied, and he opened them again.

"Say, son," he cried, "hasn't that swell college of yours ever taught you? Eat? You need to mind that the right steer starts the day with drink. It gets around after the dew before the sun can lap it up. And when the day's through, and the darn sun sets, it just gets back and drinks a whole lot more. Corn-cake Serrup? Huh! You can go drown Maidie an' her flap-jacks. Don't want neither of 'em."

Benny's morning was a sort of institution. It had an almost child-like peeve. And Rodney could remember it as far back as he could remember anything. Now he simply revelled in the happy fashion in which his mother caught the ball of it and flung it back again.

"You need to get away from the heat of this valley at harvest time, Benny, dear," she smiled concernedly. "It isn't good you getting these sick headaches. We'll have you getting a stroke, or something. I always did say the work of these outlands was too hard on a delicate constit—"

"Oh, hell! Get sense, Sally!"

A blending of humour and stormy impatience set Benny's eyes wide and staring as he regarded his beaming Sarah. He flung two hands in a scornful gesture.

"Delicate! Sick—nothing! 'Tain't none o' that junk. Jest hooch. Plain darn booze. Gee, if the Crack of Doom's like the split around the roof of my fool head I guess the world looks like fallin' clear through. Say, Roddy," Benny sighed despairingly, "don't you never go for to fall for the smooth likker Gran Wilford pushes at you. The boy that sets in with that rubber-gutted cattle-boss needs the gills of a cold fish, and the likker space of a ship's bilge. Hell! Did that darn colt gallop?"

Benny forgot his "morning after" in his final question. It was eager. Sarah dismissed the rest with a gesture of hands that had resisted the inroads of her toiling years, and awaited reply with no less eagerness. Standing beside her big son she matched the figure which had been her gift to him, and questioned with eyes that were his, too.

"Gallop?" Rodney laughed and shook his head. "Guess the world begins and ends for you folks with Kentucky Kid. Well, I guess a new world has started right in with—Coppermine."

"As good as that, Roddy?" His mother breathed as though hardly daring belief.

"Better, Ma."

Benny's dark eyes flashed. But he said nothing while his gaze turned northward. He stared frowning for some silent moments. Then came a question that seemed irrelevant.

"What's Live Oak doin' about it?" he snapped.

"Needs a year's wages on loan to buy pools with."

Benny snorted.

"A clean, crazy cattle tough!" he snarled. "He'd bet the limit on any four-flush dealt him."

"Coppermine's no four-flush, Benny," Rodney demurred softly.

"Ain't he?" Benny's rocker swayed violently. "Any blame hoss is a four-flush till it leads the string past the judges' box. Ther's two months and more till the Cup. And a hell of a lot can do in that time. The Wilford bunch 'll set Live Oak's pools cheap. Young Billee and that Nick feller can't collect enough dollars to play on the Bolt hoss."

Rodney nodded.

"I know, sir," he replied, observing his happy college habit which always came back to him in serious moments. "But they didn't see Coppermine lick Jade Green with pounds of dead weight the worst of the deal. Live Oak

reckons Iron Bolt's only a certainty in Coppermine's—absence."

Three pairs of eyes found a point of common observation. It was northward where the smoke mist hung over the valley.

Sarah bestirred uneasily at last, and turned to her son.

"You know, Roddy," she said, with a little note of complaint, "there's things I expect from Benny because he's Benny, and you never can tell. But why you and Live Oak planned fire-breaks and left them uncut I can't think. I'd say it's a deal better buy than grading a road over to Blacktail so you can run your automobile on it." Then she laughed as she saw the frown of serious thought shadow her boy's plain face. "Maybe I'd have hated the day you were born if you'd dared to cut a single spruce, or maple, or poplar, from around my home," she went on. "But I'd have been proud of the sense and nerve that did it."

"I know, Ma, dear," Rodney smiled patiently. "But we couldn't cut 'em now by—next spring."

"Tcha! 'Tain't fire-breaks we need. It's a hangin'! An' Live Oak knows it!"

Benny's sudden explosion drove to complete silence. It was the muteness of those who knew he had jumped straight to the heart of things.

The easy tones of Rodney finally broke the silence.

"Live Oak's philosophy says, 'don't think till you've got to act,'" he said, with a lift of his shoulders. "I think he's right. This stuff isn't getting us anywhere. Coppermine can pull that Cup in a cow-lope. There's two months or so. And there's a bunch of us who intend to act if need be, so Coppermine isn't absent when the gate goes up. But there's other things, sir," he went on, turning to a glowering Benny, still hunched deep in the embrace of his rocker. "And I think they can upset Iron Bolt just as easily as Coppermine. Europe looks like blowing up into war. And if it does you can't tell. My big worry is that

great little old country over the water. You couldn't stop her sneaking into a war if it was only a couple of yellow curs scrapping over a bone. She's right up to the neck in any mix-up that needs grit. Well, if she gets into this I guess we folk aren't the bunch to stand around looking on. I'm looking for news in Calford. So I'll just pack in your share of Maidie's griddle-cakes as well as mine, and then maybe I'll feel strong to bring it back with me."

He grinned down at the square, huddled figure with affectionate humour. And Benny's response was no less. He came to his feet with an agility to which his son was accustomed.

"You'll pack none of mine, you darn young scallawag," he cried. "You're not putting that one over. Eat? Say, I'm one of that bunch that ain't standin' around lookin' on. If there's to be war I'll say we start right off on Maidie's flap-jacks. Gee! There's going to be one hell of a slaughter!"

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A red-headed, sweating, and mature Seeds took the reins from the girl he had offered to dismount. Billee had scorned the assistance. She stood there in breeches and boots, her pretty shoulders lost under the glossy sheen of a white open-throated shirt. With a flap-brimmed prairie-hat pulled low over her red-gold hair she was a fascinating picture of lovely girlhood.

Billee was grown. Slim like her big, lean father, radiant with the joy of life, she gazed upon her sunlit world of hills out of eyes which were wells of the deepest violet. Billee was of that age and temper when she found life to be no more effort than was required to absorb the thrill with which she found it to be packed.

It had been something in the nature of a dress rehearsal for the dappled, iron-grey colt Billee was to ride in the Calford Cup. A mile and a half gallop against the clock. And in the company of a stable-companion. It was over

a measured track set out in a great pasture once given over to the round-up calves awaiting the branding iron.

They were grouped about the object of a generous admiration. And the girl watched her appraising parent.

There was the keenest interest in Grant Wilford's skilful hands as they passed firmly down two fore-legs which were black points to a beautiful body fashioned through a long line of aristocratic British ancestors. Billee appreciated her father's real knowledge of a horse. She followed his further examination of the plated hoofs. And observed while he took hold of the colt's snaffle and raised its head to look into its full, glowing eyes. His gaze was finally for dainty nostrils breathing with no more gush than would have disturbed a candle-flame.

Then came the nod of his grey head. And his verdict in his word-sparing fashion.

"Fi-ne," he drawled.

Billee's eyes shone. Despite her dominant youth, the child in her found her father's judgment to be a rock upon which she was unashamed to seek support.

"How was his action?" she asked anxiously.

Again came the movement of the big head. This time there was a shrewd smile in steady eyes.

"On the high side. But it don't signify. You've got to mind his grandsire was the best of his time in the British classics. An' he had the same action. He's not as fond of the daisies as Roddy's Coppermine. But they breed 'em that way down Benny's home." He chuckled. "Maybe it's because they've nothin' over to spare."

Billee's whole being was radiant with delight and confidence.

"And the clock? You haven't told or shown me, Daddy."

Grant Wilford's smile was teasing as he shook his massive head.

"Get all the bets you know, kid. I'll pick up a few myself."

"You won't tell me?"

"No need to."

"No. I wonder how Coppermine did. They were trying him out this morning, too." Billee's eyes forgot to smile. "Roddy talks like Iron Bolt was no more than a cow horse. Of course it's just to tease, I know. But," she laughed, "it gets me mad when I don't want to get mad. You know, Daddy, darling, Roddy's just wonderful some-ways the way he handles things over there. But when it comes to Coppermine it's Live Oak I'm scared of. That old rascal's got all the sharps licked when it comes to horseflesh."

Billee's slim shoulders went up as she regarded the vision of iron-grey beauty restlessly pawing the sun-baked soil of the spacious yard surrounded by its horse-boxes.

"Yeah."

Grant's drawl was a reply that might have any meaning. Billee flashed a quick glance.

"Why's Live Oak putting up that mongrel Abie Klas?" she asked. "Do you know what I think? It's because he's the only match for my weight over there. If Live Oak don't dare ride himself it means he's scared of Iron Bolt—badly. Know what I mean, Daddy? Live Oak would need to give me more than twenty pounds, seeing it's catch weights. Well, if Coppermine's all Roddy pretends they'd risk that rather than put up that nigger rat. Live Oak's the best thing on a race-track that ever came out of Uncle Benny's Kentucky. I'll give him all that, even though he's no longer a youngster. And I guess if he was up on Coppermine, showing me all that difference in weight, I wouldn't risk a five cent bet on the Bolt."

"Yeah."

Grant's steady eyes remained on the horse. But he jerked his big head at the horse boxes surrounding them.

"Get him right off back home, Seeds," he ordered in his easy way. "Get him sponged and rubbed over. Don't let his boy forget his knee-boots. We can't have those legs damaged. Get his hoofs packed, too. We got to watch them

with the going granite hard. Get on to it, boy. We don't want any chill in this darn heat."

He turned to Billee as the colt moved off.

"You need to feel good, kid," he smiled, with a nod of reassurance. "The clock can't lie."

Billee registered gratitude and called after Seeds.

"I'll be along down after awhile," she said, and turned back to the big man beside her. "I'm just going right up to claw Nick along to the oats, Daddy. We got to get them carried by week-end. I've got a whole-time job with the colt after that."

Even as she talked Billee realized the change. The man's eyes lent themselves to a sort of granite hardening. And she saw it now.

"That darn boy needs to take a fall," he growled, with nothing easy or slow in the manner of it. "He was badly likkered last night or this morning, or I miss my guess. He set that horse of his in the barn and left his saddle cinched tight. The poor blamed brute was still chawing its bit instead of hay when I stepped in this morning."

There was deadly anger in the manner of it. And disgust drew Billee's brows in a pucker of frowning. She turned to hide it. And gazed away out over the sprawl of buildings which was the splendid home of which, since her mother's death, she had become the mistress. She was searching her mind to avert a storm.

Billee's disturbance seemed hardly warranted. But she knew her father. And she knew Nick. Then she knew all the circumstances. She had long been the buffer between an iron-willed man and a crazy-tempered youth who saw life as a pastime to suit his pleasure.

Young Nick Woodley had grown to manhood much in the manner which had been inevitable. Environment and education had superimposed upon foundations which had been rigidly set. He was a handsome product of buoyant manhood. He had a charm of seeming that was strong in its appeal. But the foundations underlying were as they

had been built. And they were concrete in their resistance in contact with any edifice, however skilful its erection, built upon them.

Nick was a child of the hills and the forests. He was the natural product of reckless, untamed forbears. His blood was rich with the primitive of life. And so the youngster found no escape from the call of the wilderness whence he hailed, or from the recklessness it had bred in him. Billee had seen it in early days. And in later she had watched her childhood's beloved playmate degenerate into what she sadly deplored as "a fool kid."

It was the utmost to which she would commit herself by way of derogation. She knew Nick drank without scruple. She knew he gambled in Blacktail and Calford every cent of the money he could extract from her lavish father. She knew he hated the dull routine of the great farm which had been built up to produce the wealth he was so eager to fling broadcast. She knew his only care was for the traps he set in the hills. And for the guns with which he slaughtered so skilfully.

But being utterly feminine, a woman whose deepest sympathies were involved, Billee sought and found excuse. She promised herself it was youth's wild oats. She told herself it was a youthful phase which would pass. She encouraged herself that all that was needed was a tiding over. Then later, Nick, with all his ready wits, and undoubted smartness, would finally settle down to bear his share in heavy responsibilities which at present weighted her father's powerful shoulders, and not a little burdened hers.

Billee was telling herself that old, old story, that precious illusion, with which a woman is so ready to blind the evidence of unsaulting vision. And as is inevitable she believed herself. Clear-eyed and keen, where her childhood's playmate was concerned Billee yet failed to perceive the quicksands upon which she was building.

Her father had been loyal to her dead mother. He had

shouldered the burden of Nick's up-bringing and future ungrudgingly. He had lavished on his foster son with a generosity that was equal to that which he lavished on his own flesh and blood. But the grown youngster's wildness, and indifference to the great enterprise which some day it was intended he would share with Billee, had exasperated.

It was more than exasperation. And Billee knew it. Her long suffering, kindly father was on the verge of turning loose those harsh passions which she knew could be so devastating.

"I don't think he was liquored, Daddy," she said, flinging herself to defence without real thought. "I guess he was late, and—and just forgot or something," she finished up lamely.

"Forgot?"

The grey eyes came round to the anxious beauty under the brim of the girl's hat. The scorn was withering. The eyes were alight with implacable, cold fire.

"The boy that forgets the poor darn thing that works under his saddle hasn't no sort of use around this layout. Kid, I know. You're scared for that boy being hurt. Wal, get it right here. For your mother's sake, and yours, he won't. But he's had the last nickel I'll see fed to those two sharps Mathersbee and Doc Myer, or paid for the gut-wash they call likker in Blacktail. He won't get hurt from me. No. The hurt I see coming is the sort of hurt Benny was quick to ~~see~~ ahead years back when you were a kid gal."

"You mean his—father?"

The man's big shoulders went up.

"I just mean that stuff us folks can talk easy. But don't rightly know the stuff we're talking."

CHAPTER V

The Triangle

AS WELL-FOUND FARMING ENTERPRISE there was little to choose between the two. Benny's homestead realized all that was demanded for sound and skilful farming without luxurious embellishment. In fact, buildings had largely been adapted. And the conservative mind of Sarah had seen no necessity for any form of change in the home which had afforded her years of modest happiness.

The Blacktail homestead, however, was different. Grant had had behind him a woman who spent herself providing what she believed to be the needs of the young lives which were her mother trust.

Hester had known no contentment where was concerned that which she and her word-sparing man were leaving by the wayside of their lives. Her whole objective was the founding of a lavish home which should be a thing in which youth might find delight.

So Grant had been left to his grain, his machinery, his horse-raising, while Hester had become a whole-time worker to achieve her dream. It became the tragedy of her unselfish life when she learned that the fulfilment of her dream was to be denied her.

But Hester had left behind her a heritage of greater appeal than she knew. And a young school-girl, and a saddened man, who saw no other woman in the world but the poor tired body he had laid to rest, seized upon it avidly and with a common purpose. They found in the completion of the mother's unfinished task a little sacred office of infinite appeal.

Hester's dream had come true. The house had spacious

dignity. It had, too, that most precious charm, atmosphere. It belonged to the beautiful valley of the Blacktail. It was part of an outland-furnishing where Nature had expended in lavish mood.

It stood up on the rise of the Valley's northern slope where the smile of reflected sunlight could broadcast from its upper windows over a wide range of costly farm buildings, and across the broad waters of a streaming mountain river. It outlooked upon the colourful distance where multi-hued forest clothed the hills which formed the valley's southern limits.

It had two floors. Its roof was low-pitched and tastefully gabled. Then the four-sides of its spacious square were deeply verandahed. It was of framed pine and shingle. And it was hued a rich maroon that found relief in gleaming white at every framed angle.

To its last detail the house remained the dead mother's home. Nothing of her planning had been left undone. Nothing had been added. Billee had sternly pledged herself. While her father had no desire apart from his dead wife. Between them they had created a simple monument which was an expression of the life they had both adored.

Billee made the ascent to the southern porch of the house in some haste. The girl was anxious. She was troubled. The violet of her lovely eyes had darkened under the press of thought behind them.

Well enough she knew her childhood's cheerful playmate had been perilously straying at the brink of disaster ever since his return from college nearly five years ago. To herself, now, she did not excuse him. But she knew her father was to be reckoned with. She knew how much, how very much, her father meant to Nick's future. And as she thought of the granite hard she had witnessed in his grey eyes she was by no means sure that Nick had not already taken a fatal step.

She was angry with Nick. She was disgusted. She was desperately uneasy. She meant to have a straight talk with

him. And as she took the steps of the porch two at a time she reminded herself that Nick was a fool. And she forgot the addition of that "kid" which was her tolerant wont.

As Billee stepped on to the porch a flash of humour broke through her less happy mood. It was the sound of voices somewhere in the sacred precincts of old Minty's kitchens. One was high pitched and scolding. The other was full of familiar laughter. She knew that Nick was cajoling for a breakfast at this late hour.

The battle of it amused. For Minty was a tyrant. She claimed herself to be of pure Indian blood. But Billee knew her to be a queer admixture of red, white, and black. But the woman was a treasured cook who knew her own worth, and acted accordingly.

Billee hurriedly passed in through the open French window to encounter a victorious Nick emerging from the battlefield of Minty's kitchen.

For Nick it was an unanticipated encounter. And he came to a startled halt in the curtained archway which was the entrance from a hallway to the pleasant lounging apartment.

It framed him happily. Clean-cut, slim, clad in cord breeches and laced field-boots, and wearing an open-throated shirt with sleeves rolled tight to his elbows, with keen dark eyes and his black hair sleekly brushed and shining, Nick was a picture of attractive, boyish manhood. It was the laughing cheer in him, however, that was his strong appeal to Billee. In that moment his many delinquencies were reduced to insignificance.

Nick was caught off his guard. And his delight at the encounter released a look of hot admiration that had nothing that was brotherly in it.

"Say, Billee!" he cried. "You surely got to be a thought reader, or have television, or something. I was wanting you like a drowning sailor needs fresh water. You're all I've got between me, and—and—I just jollied old Minty into the sort of mood when she wants to fix me some eats. So there's

time enough for us to shoot. Gee! You look great and—and dazzling in that snappy riding suit, kid. Still I'd rather you were wearing robes and things, carrying a harp and halo and growing a crop of feather wings."

There was something in it that startled Billee. She searched a face that was troubled despite its smile. And finally she summoned a lamentably short supply of cool dignity, and sat herself on the swaying arm of a rocker.

"Trouble, of course," she said sharply.

Nick hurried. He crossed the room with swift, eager strides, bumped a chair and flung it aside. He halted before the seated figure with a shaft of sunlight shining athwart his handsome figure.

"Trouble, of course," he imitated. Then: "Say, Billee, did you ever know the sun get up except to light a crazy world full of fool men's troubles?" He gestured with limp hands which flapped the air. "Of course you didn't. I dunno," he sighed. "Guess it must have been that foul belly-wash Mathersbee dopes out for liquor. The vultures gathered last night. And I was the carrion. They cleaned me out. And I paid 'em with cheques that 'll—come back to 'em."

"Nick!"

It exploded with horror. And it was met by a laugh that had harshened.

"Angel registers horror, but no pity!"

It mocked. But Nick stood there in an anxiety he could not hide.

Billee's lips firmed. They even hardened at the tone of it. Her eyes, too, had hardened in the manner of her father's.

"So you ran your horse off its feet. And set him in the barn double-cinched tight, and trying to get feed out of the rusty steel of a dirty bit."

It was withering in its scorn. And the girl literally shot it at him. It was the passionate charge of a horse lover. And it hurt the more that a sober Nick loved his horse no less.

"Not on your life," he cried hotly. "I don't do that," he

denied. Then he drew a sharp breath as the girl mutely affirmed. "Hell! But did I?" he appealed weakly.

Billee realized. Her father had been right. She flung out two slim appealing hands.

"Oh, Nick!" she cried. "You crazy fool! Crazy? Oh! So drunk you couldn't fix your horse and can't remember! So drunk you couldn't get up to eat, and see Iron Bolt gallop. So drunk the oat harvest can go hang. So drunk you don't care my Daddy's back's like a fighting porcupine. Oh, what's the use? Won't you get sense? It's not as if you rightly belong to him. I know it's only kid foolishness. But—but—! It was Daddy found your horse that way. And now—now those—bad cheques!"

The girl's distress was almost tearful. She saw nothing but utter disaster. And she gazed wide-eyed into a dark face whose gloom robbed it of half its good looks.

Nick leaned himself on the corner of an occasional table and they regarded each other in miserable silence.

It was Nick who reacted.

"Makinaw!" he ejaculated. "If Gran located that poor darn plug the seeds of kindness will be scattered to the winds of— Hell!" he flung up his hands. "Finance? What a hope!"

"Those cheques?" Billee frowned. "How much?"

The sleek head inclined while the dark eyes watched.

"Two thousand five hundred 'll cover 'em."

It came at once with significant readiness. And it came with a sigh that was an unguarded expression of relief. Nick plunged headlong.

"Billee, kid, you will, won't you?" All Nick's persuasion was in the tone of it. "I daren't let those cheques come back. I— It would end everything. I was going to see Gran. I was going to promise him what I'll promise you instead. It's no use going to him after that horse business. He'd forgive homicide. But not that. He'd let me rot in hell for hurting a poor dumb beast I wouldn't hurt for worlds."

He paused. And the contrition in him was no pretence. Billee warmed to him.

"Listen," he went on, leaning eagerly towards her rocker. "You've pulled me out plenty scrapes. You've always been that angel I guessed about. Don't shoot me to bits now. Lend me the stuff to back those cheques, and I'll swear before God it's the last. I'll make a real clean up. I'll quit the hooch. And I won't ever again sit in with that bunch as long as I live. You've got it all back, too. Just as soon as Iron Bolt pulls that Cup from under Master Roddy's nose. I've got all sorts of bets at goodish odds right now. And I mean to grab every pool I can claw hold of on the day. We're going to pick up a fortune. Will you?"

Billee swayed her rocker thoughtfully. And slowly there returned the dawn of her radiant smile. No more than twenty-one she felt like the mature mother of this youth of twenty-four. She could not forget their years together. She could not resist the eager face with its real distress. She fell with no more than a murmur of protest.

"It's the absolute last, though, Nick, dear," she said firmly. "You're a thoughtless boy. You don't know quite what it means to me. I'll have to go without lots of things. Even I may have to give up a new frock for the Harvest Ball at Calford. You never think of anything like that, do you? Still I'll forgive you all that. It's that other that hurts. Your poor horse. But still I do know you're as keen about horseflesh as I am. We'll leave it that way. I'll write that cheque. And I'll go right in to Calford and pay it to your account myself while you get off to the oats, and—Oh, you silly, silly kid!"

It was the lift of two strong arms that caught her slim body and lifted it from the unstable arm of the rocker. Before Billee realized the intent a resounding kiss was impressed hotly upon her laughing lips.

Billee struggled free. And she quite failed to witness the leap of passionate fire in the dark eyes as their lips contacted. It was Minty who created diversion. As the girl stood free

of the youth's embrace the woman's round goggle-eyes beamed across the hallway. Minty's eyes beamed whatever her mood.

"You'm come set in quick an' mak eat," she flung at the smiling Nick. "You'm scallawag feller, Nick! Ahm all belate! Truth! An' that's a fac'! Missie Billee you'm chase him quick, dat bad feller. Lordy him set us all folks noway, anyhow."

The scold of it had no meaning. Minty vanished as abruptly as she had appeared. And Nick turned to go.

"You'll write it now?" he asked eagerly.

It was a little desperate. Billee moved towards the small escritoire standing by the open window. She nodded.

"Get along, boy," she urged. "Don't keep old Minty, or there'll be more fool man's trouble for the sun to shine on. Seeing your financial ways aren't reliable you can leave it to me, and—forget it."

Nick went. He went without a word. There were no thanks. And even his smile had passed.

Billee was glad of it. It was a scene, which, with many variations, had all too often been enacted between them.

She sat at the desk. She wrote and signed the necessary cheque which sadly depleted her bank balance. Then, as she tore it from its stub with a little sigh, and blotted it, she was interrupted by the clatter of horse's hoofs arriving at the porch.

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They were standing together in the shade of the porch. Billee, and the "Roddy, boy" of her childhood's adoration. The girl was smiling up into eyes that returned her smile of casual greeting.

Rodney Hyles, too, was breeched and booted. His big body was without its coat, which was loosely lashed at the back of his Mexican saddle.

In comparison with Nick's swarthy good-looks he possessed no more than fine eyes and an immensity of bone and

muscle. His face had purpose and rugged strength. His fair hair had luxuriance but little care. Yet Billee knew a thrill behind the mischievous gleam which the thought of their rivalry for the famous Calford Cup inspired.

Rodney's announcement came with his nod of greeting.

"Want to pick up the automobile," he said. "Making Calford by noon to fix that road-grading contract. Ma sent all sorts of love an' stuff, and wants you to go with her into Calford after harvest to choose her frock for the Harvest Ball. Reckons to make a day of it, I guess. All het up to have you help her. Says you know just what suits her."

He was packing a disreputable pipe with the deliberate care which was so much his way. Billee watched him amusedly. She liked his casual way when they were together. It was so different from most of the men she knew. He seemed to take their friendship for granted. He seemed to feel there was never need to impress himself upon her. And she knew in her heart how right he was.

"Of course I will," she said. "You can just tell Auntie Sarah she doesn't have to ask me—ever. And, anyway, I was going to ask her to help me choose mine." Then she laughed, and her gaze averted. "I guess my luck's better than I thought, Roddy," she went on. "You can run me into Calford, too, if you can wait while I change this suit. It's rather urgent and—Say, we made our gallop. What about that mean cayuse of yours you call Coppermine? Did he fall dead, or pull up lame? Did he tail, and just crawl the distance? Guess Live Oak must be hard set making him over."

Rodney lit his pipe, blowing gusts of smoke.

"Making the colt's coffin. Outsize."

Billee chuckled.

"Pity," she deplored. "Rotten colour—sorrel, of course."

Rodney's eyes considered the mass of the girl's red gold hair.

"Sure. So close to those things they fix in hash—carrots. How's that scrap-iron Bolt of yours?"

"On his toes. Wondering why in Hallelujah Daddy's not asking him to the party to share the swell liquor he means to christen his Cup with."

Rodney nodded.

"Doesn't want to disappoint him, I guess. Where's Nick?"
Billee laughed.

"Oh, Roddy, you are a worm. You always wriggle," she cried delightedly. "Nick's eating—late. What about running me in to Calford?"

"Sure, kid," Rodney nodded at the farm buildings below them. "Heard he'd got in. Beat it along. And do your best to brighten the lives of Calford's populace. I'll go fix my plug in the barn. And fill up the tank with juice. A half hour?"

Billee nodded.

"Easy," she laughed back at him. "Don't try to get at Iron Bolt while you're down there. Seeds is kind of dangerous. Goes around with a couple of sawed off Winchesters."

Rodney moved down to the horse at the tie-post and heaved his body into the saddle.

"He'll likely need 'em—after the race," he grinned up at her.

Billee's laughter pealed after him as he moved off towards the barns.

"You're a good scrapper, Roddy," she called. "But why can't you get sore sometimes? Daddy told me to buy all the bets I fancy. Iron Bolt's good. The clock says so."

Rodney reined up and turned. He shook a regretful head.

"Sorry," he lamented. "Never knew a clock that couldn't lie."

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The half hour was not yet up when Rodney started up his engine.

Rodney had all the keen mechanical mind of youth. The high powered engine afforded him a delight he frankly admitted. The joy of speed was deeply rooted in him. And

there could be little doubt that the road-grading enterprise, for economic reasons, was not without a founding of personal desire for the speed of his precious machine.

He slipped in his clutch and headed up towards the house. He had no intention of keeping Billee waiting. He smiled to himself as he remembered Billee's claim for her own good luck in having him drive her into Calford. And he registered a silent acknowledgment that it was nothing to the good luck that had befallen him.

Rodney had one thought alone as he manoeuvred his machine amongst the intricate confusion of maroon-hued buildings. It was of a mass of hair he loved to spurn as "carrots." And the violet of eyes the sight of which never failed to set his strong pulses hammering.

Gazing eagerly at the porch as the machine approached it Rodney's mind quickened at the sight of its occupant. It was not Billee. It was a lounging Nick consuming an after breakfast cigarette. He was glad. His gladness, however, was for the fact that Billee had not yet completed that toilet that was to brighten the lives of Calford's citizens.

Rodney drew up at the steps and nodded greeting as he stepped out of the machine. Passing up the steps he said the thing that was in his mind.

"Billee told me you were back," he observed shortly.

And the regard between the two was in the manner of men who have gazed into the same pair of lovely eyes and found them haunting.

Nick was mentally and gastronomically at peace. He was leaning at one of the roof supports undisturbed by any desire to visit the oat harvest. The sight of Rodney in his automobile excited no particular enthusiasm, but some curiosity. He smiled as he shrugged.

"Yep," he nodded. "Sundown yesterday. And darn glad."

"No luck?"

Rodney scratched a match inelegantly on his cord breeches. He lit the pipe he had allowed to go out while dealing with his machine's gas. His keen eyes studied the

good-looking face in view of Live Oak's story of his overnight game.

Nick inhaled and flung the stub of his cigarette away. It was a gesture of irritation. And the eyes that looked at the man who towered over him expressed nothing of his mood at greeting. They were troubled.

"What a hope," he deplored.

He gazed out westward and to the north where the sky was clear, and without any sign of the smoke mist which had veiled the valley of Benny Hyles. He laughed shortly.

"I'd brought down a blacktail buck when I got the first sniff of it," he went on in a tone of bitter disgust. "You know, Roddy, it licks me. Maybe you'll understand. I don't. All I know is I'm no darn coward. Show me the feller looking for a 'rough and tough,' and I'll fight till he's chawed my ears and gouged both my eyes. Yet there's some darn yellow in me somewhere, Fire! Hand me a sniff of fire where trees grow and I'll hare with any dirty skunk in the panic race of it. Man, I hadn't the cold sense to lift that buck to my saddle, and tote it home here to old Minty for a harvest hash. I get mad when I think of it. But what's the use? It doesn't make things a darn bit better. Show me a forest afire and my blood's just mean ice-water." He sighed. His gloom was lamentable as he gazed away at the far distance. "It seems like it's burnt out, though," he added after a pause.

Rodney looked on as a fresh cigarette was stabbed into Nick's clean-shaven mouth. He held out matches. Nick accepted them without thanks.

"Doesn't seem so queer to me," Rodney observed quietly, as the other returned the matches and inhaled. "You need to look back at things. I remember. But then I was older than you. And I got the whole ghastly yarn of it from Benny. You see, you were a sick kid. You went through it all. You knew about your father being burnt alive. It would stampede a stone image let alone a kid boy. You don't have to worry you feel that way."

Rodney's smile had sympathy and understanding.

"The boy that reckons you a coward needs to think again. Even if it's yourself." He shrugged. And produced an old silver timepiece. "I'm toting Billee into the city. She's guessing to make business, too. She said a half hour. It's three quarters already," he smiled.

Nick's eyes veiled.

"She said something about it," he admitted casually. "But what's taking you in while you're cutting oats?"

"That road-grading. Signing the contract. Then I need news."

"News? How?"

Nick's interest was perfunctory. Again he was gazing into the far distance as though the memory of that fire still disturbed.

Rodney heard a light step somewhere in the house.

"It's Europe," he said. "War, I'm guessing."

And he smiled as Billee's casual regrets preceded her.

"Sorry, Roddy," she cried laughingly as she hurried across the lounge towards the window. "It's all your own fault, though. You shouldn't have incited me to brighten folks lives. Oh, you found Nick."

She glanced from one to the other as she emerged on the porch. And her gaze finally rested on the lounging Nick.

"Anything you want in Calford, Nick?" she asked. "Cigarettes, or—I'm on business. I'll have plenty time."

It was a moment when both men forgot the talk between them, and dropped back to their cool attitude at greeting. They were gazing at the girl's loveliness. Billee was a ravishing picture of smiling, modish femininity.

Nick gazed with openly devouring gaze. Rodney blew smoke and looked with eyes closely narrowed lest they should betray.

Nick shook his head.

"Can't think of a thing," he said. "You aren't likely to go near my bank, are you?"

Billee smiled under the wide, loose brim of a hat that shaded her pretty eyes.

"Why surely," she said. "Cash?"

The big man behind the pipe was content to watch the play of it without understanding.

Nick laughed in a manner which was a return to his most cheerful.

"Cash? Not as easy as that," he demurred. "But it don't matter. I'll run in myself after we're through with the oats. Guess I'll beat it along, or Gran'll read the riot act. So long, Roddy. Don't get reckless with that machine of yours. You aren't alone."

He laughed. And the manner of it added to the sting of his final words.

But he made no move to go. He remained leaning on his post. His smile passed as he gazed after the departing machine. And there was no friendliness in his regard of the massive body that seemed to overflow the seat behind its driving wheel.

CHAPTER VI

Sitting In

WAR! THERE HAD BEEN A MOMENT OF INTENSE THRILL. There had been hysteria. Then had come reaction. Focus had adapted. Nerve had steadied. And the eyes of the world looked on at the unfolding drama with cool calculation behind them. It was all more than eight weeks old now.

War was news no longer. Only its tragic, or heroic, incidents. Generally speaking, at its start, it had nothing of outstanding newness, except that its machinery was of a later pattern. Objective remained as hoary as the age of man. Destruction, conquest. The same soulless policy which always turned the rope and compelled the helpless citizen to skip.

One incident, however, had stirred even the cynical. The casehardened saw in it an expression of self interest. The less sophisticated found it heroic. And even noble. There were also those who saw in it the Hand of Destiny. At any rate the world was not left guessing its implication. And the War Lords of Central Europe, when the news reached them, shuddered grave apprehension even while they laughed their contemptuous scorn.

Britain had joined issue! And at once! Without pause! Almost without debate she had unleashed the whole weight of her wealth. The whole resources of her might. And for the reason that her honour was more precious to her people than their national well-being.

She had dumbfounded the cynical prophets by the fulfilment of a pledge which advantaged her not. Once again she was marching in the van to the succour of the defenceless.

The rest was pathetic in its hackneyed commonplace for

the disguising of political crime. Following the mobilization of every destructive force came national mobilization. Every news-sheet was enlisted to feed its reader with blood-saturated stories of enemy iniquity, and to serve up lying propaganda to stimulate or restrain war spirit according to policy. Every scribe, and orator, and artist, of talent rather than truth, was summoned to provide opinion for the unthinking and the incapable. Reassurance was the task of the quidnuncs. They sagely enunciated the economic impossibility of prolonged conflict, and knowingly hinted at peace intervention by the "big ones" who manipulated the strings of the world's money bags. Commerce, of course, remained true to itself. It saw opportunity. And, to its last man, it had given itself up to snatching profit from the blood sacrifice of it all.

It was an abyss threatening destruction with the world staggering at its brink. But what matter? A dancing world saw no reason to lay aside its fiddle.

Where forests grew and hills abounded the din of war was little more than an echo, remote, unreal. It provided topic for party talk wherever men foregathered. It served a medium for the contentious. It inspired flattering dreams of the heroic, and presented visions of repellent aspect. It fired lusts and stirred virile pulses. But, as yet, that was all. It was wholly subject to the daily round.

It could not have been otherwise where no contact obtained. And, in consequence, in Calford's life, the bumper grain harvest which had been already carried remained paramount. The annual Harvest Ball would culminate an abundant season. And no war thrill could ever hope to rival that which the race for the Calford Cup would provide for those whose year had been lived in anticipation of its week of harvest festival in October.

As the sun went down in the Blacktail Valley on the day of the Harvest Ball something of the Western attitude was epitomized on Grant Wilford's porch. A quick-eyed Benny, and the massive word-sparer, Grant, were looking

on while youth, in the tolerant care of a beautifully gowned and cloaked Sarah Hyles, was preparing for the gaiety of the long night to come.

Benny had speeded them in the fashion peculiar to himself. And his speeding had been produced from a shaker which had once been the official property of a famous bartender on New York's Broadway. They were waiting while Rodney dealt with a trifling engine defect in the automobile drawn up at the steps.

It was Billee, wrapped for a blowy journey in an open tourer, whose eagerness would not be denied as Rodney straightened up from his engine. He was listening to the smooth purr of the machine with its bonnet open.

"Going to be all right, Roddy?" she enquired of the big creature, bulking largely in well-cut evening clothes.

Rodney glanced round with a confident smile.

"Like Coppermine. Ready to run for its life."

It was Nick, standing behind Billee's warmly clad shoulder, who produced instant laughing reply.

"Pity she's not like Iron Bolt. We'd get there quicker."

Benny shook a meditative head as he consumed the last of his own liberal sixth of the cocktail he had produced.

"British—an' slow," he murmured slyly.

It came in a flash. And eyes were alight. And soft, rounded cheeks were flushed. Billee hurled it at her beloved Uncle Benny with patriotic fervour.

"Slow?" she echoed scornfully. "I guess Belgium and France don't think that way. And that Kaiser fellow's just about wishing the old country was slow. Uncle Benny, darling, you're going to take that right back. I'm British. So's Daddy. Even though we're thousands of miles from where folks hear Bow Bells. And if ever they want us over there I guess they won't need to ask twice."

"Sure. Billee's dead right."

It rumbled drawlingly behind Grant's broad smile. Grant watched for Benny's reaction with a twinkle of humour.

Benny glanced round at the laughing faces. He flung up a pair of muscular hands in appeal.

"Help!" he grinned, at the outraged Billee. Then,

"Say, kid, when you get that call you might put a word over the wire an' remind them Kentucky ain't always been United States Territory. And some of us boys haven't forgot that's so."

Billee's eyes reflected the light of the setting sun. They shone very softly.

"Thanks, Uncle Benny, darling. I just love you for that." Then her humour supervened. "Now you can just say anything you fancy about my Iron Bolt—till he's spread-eagled that sorrel cayuse of yours."

Sarah joined in the general laugh. But she shook her head.

"Very pretty, children," she admonished. "But it's automobiles, and not horses. Dancing, and not war. I guess Benny must have set a special kick in that cocktail. Now come along. Roddy's waiting. We got to get right off. Seeing Roddy's driving his contraption Nick had best sit with him. Seems good to me when we do crash and the end comes for the boys to go first."

There was a general move to the porch steps with the two older men remaining behind. Grant and Benny were both smiling at Sarah's genius. It was quite clear she had no intention of rousing any jealousy between Nick and Rodney by letting Billee ride with either of them.

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The automobile had threaded its way amongst the farm buildings. It had passed on to the broad trail which followed the river's course. Benny and Grant, from their vantage ground on the valley slope, watched it streaking between vast expanses of stubble which the gang ploughs had already begun to turn in.

Benny was the first to seek a chair which would support

him for the rest of a long evening. Grant's steady eyes observed the movement with a placid smile. He came to the table and gathered the collection of many bottles from which Benny had extracted his cocktail. He removed them, passed into the house, and returned with three bottles of rye whisky, a large pitcher of water, and two glasses.

"Guess we can sit in, Benny—now," he rumbled pleasantly.

Benny considered the three brown bottles and their satisfying labels.

"Sure, Gran," he approved. "Seems right hooch's goin' to get like dew under a desert sun. Gosh, darn, man! Did you read what those Britishers are doin'? Guess that kid Billee's right, only she don't know how right. Slow? Not slow. Just crazy. They're settin' their darn distilleries to turn out alcohol so they can blow the guts out of things over there in France. Sure crazy usin' up swell imported Scotch that way. Huh!"

"Yeah."

Grant had drawn a cork and set the bottle on the table, to Benny's hand. Benny helped himself unstintingly, despite his ominous prophecy. Grant lowered a great body into his rocker and continued.

"Sunk enough likker in Hester's cellars to feed us both five years," he nodded, and lit a pipe.

Benny looked up startled so that he poured more than his four fingers. He failed to correct the measure.

"Gee!" he exclaimed his quick eyes goggling. "You sure beat hell, Gran! Five years booze for you an' me! Must have got a lake of it in those cellars."

Grant poured a drink with some exactness while Benny further prepared. He dealt with the water pitcher as though the country were suffering severely from drought. Then he eyed the amber glassful and sighed the content of a thirsty man. He lifted his glass in response to a similar salute from across the table and drank. And he sat back in voiceless

content to push a long, black cigar into the corner of his mouth and chew it.

The valley distance was purpling with evening shadows. Somehow the beauties of forest and hill took on an exaggerated allurement for Benny. Even he found nothing in the gold of stubble to offend his prejudices. With night closing down he was content enough. The night ahead of them would be a long one. And if the three bottles failed to keep step with it there was always that lake in Hester's cellars.

He turned from a great content to something less. And it found expression.

"Say, Gran," he began, with a querulous plaint. "Those two boys. I don't seem to mind the time when I was a kid feller that I ever stood around when a gal looked good to me. Billee's just the goodest looking kid west of the Atlantic coast. Get them two. Gone off dolled like a coupla prime hambones. Yearning. Both of 'em. Neither got the snap to bounce her right so they can catch her and hold good and tight. I'm tired waiting."

"Yeah."

Grant blew gusts of smoke and fumes of the liquor he appreciated no less than Benny. His steady eyes were thoughtfully contemplating the swift approach of night. Benny's hands helped to express his impatience.

"I'd say, speaking broad, there ain't nothing slow to Roddy," he meditated. "Just goes right along. And the works in that head of his is mostly doing overtime. Good works, too. Running easy in a bath of good oil." He turned to the bottle considering it as though, in some way, it was failing its duty. "Sort of works you find around a bank institution. Or them figgering how best to separate the other feller from his cents. That boy's got one eye dead set on the million mark an' can't get it off it. But hell! He's around twenty-seven. Young Nick's mostly twenty-four. And Billee breaks on twenty-one. Sort of sum oughter work out pat for a litter of kids crawling around one of our two layouts. It don't—yet."

Benny dealt with the bottle and pushed it across the table. Grant replenished his glass, pondering.

"Sure," he admitted at last.

Benny cocked a questioning eye. The best friend of his disreputable life could sometimes stir his swift impatience with that muteness of his. It did so now.

"They're both of 'em hotted for her," he declared testily, and lit a match.

"Don't signify." Grant demurred with a slow shake of his head.

"Hell! Don't signify!"

Benny's violence extinguished his match. He lit another savagely.

"Sure." Grant replied. "Guess Hester's schedule didn't figure young Nick for our Billee. Only Roddy," he said, with finality.

It was not so much the words as the tone of them. Benny drew a deep breath of relief.

"And you, Gran?" he asked.

"Hester's schedule goes."

Grant stood up and reached the hurricane lantern swinging from a roof rafter of the porch. He took it down and opened it. He lit the carefully trimmed wick, and re-closed and re-placed it. Benny watched. There was a world of friendliness in his queerly impish smile. As Grant returned to his chair Benny pushed the big man's own bottle towards him hospitably.

"That's bully hearing, Gran," he said, and blew a lot of poisonous smoke. "And it don't come amiss you saying it for me. I ain't feeling good. Nick's a hell of a good-looker boy, spite of that killer father that got him. Roddy's a swell chunk of a boy like his Ma—that way. But he ain't never looked like her since the day he was born. Seems he must have swerved my way as he grew. I tell you right here I'd give the last drain of that five year ocean of likker you got set in Hester's cellar to see Roddy teaming up with your gal. Can't think of a thing else I need like that. Ex-

cept to set a rawhide to the neck of the darn bug that's firing our swell forests."

Grant became impatient of the persistent doubt.

"You got quick eyes, Benny. Best use 'em," he said sharply.

The effect of it was salutary. Benny drank. But after a while he was protesting again.

"You need to get it right, Gran," he said at last, his square body sitting up and leaning across the table. "Course it's darn fool stuff anyway. But Roddy's got this European mix-up right into his fool head. Don't get the rights of it. Can't think how those darn kids get made like it, an' that's a fact. War? I ask you. What buzzock's going to yearn war when he can set around with a wife with swell red hair, an' the sort of eyes that set him crazy. Just can't see where he gets it from. That boy guesses the little old country 'way over there's goin' to need all them that belongs. Says he'll see all the grain in the whole darn world bankin' hell's fires before he'll sit around. Wrote the big folks in Ottawa he's yearnin'. And that his pa's got the price of a hundred machine guns if the folks across the water 'll use it. Told me I'd need to take over again, with Live Oak, till he got back, if they'd use him. And he guessed I'd best start right now to get my hand in. Say! What in hell do you do with a boy like that?"

"Fine!"

It came with a nod of approval. Grant's eyes shone in the lantern light. Benny's own impish face wore a grin of supreme pride. But he went on in a tone of grief that held the other chuckling.

"I told him he didn't have to worry me gettin' my hand in. That I'd grown darn fool wheat while he was readin' about it. But I was feelin' bad I'd lived to see the day when a kid of mine hadn't no more respect for the right use of likker than to go get, willful, his blasted guts all shot up with swell imported Scotch while a gal was left along back home guessin'. I told him the dollars for the darn machine

guns wasn't a circumstance. And if they'd loose 'em on the ignorant bums who hadn't the manners to treat a Scotch distillery right I'd feel good about it. I told him— Oh, hell! What's the use? Stood right there grinning! That's what the fool boy did! Grinned! And told me he hadn't ever ever heard that imported Scotch wasn't just as good for a boy's guts as smooth rye. I ask you?"

Benny's gesture was an expression of speechlessness. But it also helped him to intercept the bottle pushed at him. He sought fresh comfort while Grant's smile faded out.

"Good boy—Roddy," he nodded, over the rim of his glass. "It would be good to have Nick talk that way."

Benny cocked a sharp eye.

"Sure it would," he agreed, and sat pondering.

But he was not thinking of Nick. He was not thinking of the fashion in which his big son had frankly laughed at him. It was the father in him. His pride in a boy who saw the obligations that were his and welcomed them. His pride was overwhelming. But so was his apprehension. Benny was a passionate creature who was ready at all times to storm his way through life. But his own soul wilted and his hot blood ran ice cold when he thought of the big son ready to give his all for a country whose place in his life was no more than a tradition.

They sat there in silence, these two old friends. They sat on while the stars took complete possession of a cloudless night sky. After awhile Grant drew the cork of another bottle without rising from his chair. He pushed the new bottle within Benny's reach, content that the Kentuckian should go nothing short of hospitality.

Later the big man's closing eyes just glimpsed faintly the tilt of the bottle. And his ears discovered a familiar sound of pouring. Then his body settled comfortably.

Just as a full moon lifted clear of the hill-tops Benny's parental fret drove him utterly.

"How I hate the bloody war!" he snarled at it, with a

savage tilt to his lip. "Christ! If they do I'll—kill something!"

There was a sound beyond the table. Benny turned challengingly. He glared in the soft lamplight. And in a moment his snarl had expanded into a broad grin.

It was Grant's snore. His big body had crumpled. His greying head was a-loll. He was sleeping soundly, wholly indifferent as to whether Benny killed or not.

Benny's humour restored and he splashed fresh liquor into his glass.

CHAPTER VII

A City of Abundance

IT WAS IN THE OPERA HOUSE in Calford. The beginning of the famous Harvest Festival week which would end with the Calford Cup-race on the last day of it—Saturday.

There was no other hall of assembly of sufficient dimensions to accommodate the attendance at the famous annual function. The Harvest Ball was not alone a social event. It was something in the nature of civic entertainment for all those whose industry had helped to produce the city's splendid opulence. It was an organization of its city fathers. It was patronized by city fathers and their ladies. It became a platform from which city fathers could declaim without fear of controversy.

Its programme contained items which interrupted dancing seriously but had to be endured. There was a banquet disguised as a supper. And, as hosts, each city father in attendance claimed his privilege to "address a few words."

It was well past midnight and the last of these "few words" had been "addressed." It had wasted quite half an hour of a precious night.

Kate Myer, the acid-tongued wife of the doctor of Black-tail, and Sarah Hyles—a curiously assorted pair of old friends—had just learned how fortunate they were in being privileged to have the valuable and energetic services of Roland C. Baggins amongst their city's fathers. They had learned the extent of the sacrifices a wealthy grain market manipulator had to make to serve them. They had learned that the soul of Roland C. Baggins rejoiced in the sacrifices

he found himself called upon to make on their behalf. And how he hoped that the future might provide him with ever greater sacrificial opportunities.

The two women were seated in the shaded interior of a box upon the stage level. They were there to observe the throng on the dancing floor. And to enjoy themselves in a manner suitable to their advancing years.

The thin face of Kate Myer lit with a cold smile as she watched the trundling bulk of Roland C. Baggins ooze off the stage to the accompaniment of tepid applause and the opening crash of a six-eight movement by a band of many and varied instruments.

"They can't resist it, Sarah," she mocked, in a thin voice that was nasally high-pitched. "The pathetic expression of self-satisfaction and pompous vanity which has gone on since Solomon inflicted his wise-cracks on a defenceless world. The older they get the worse they fall for it. Show 'em a bunch of half-wits sitting around or looking foolish, and there's not a man, or for that matter woman, who's boosted themselves out of the general muck of life, who won't get right up and tell them a piece that doesn't matter. You know that Baggins boy 'll be waiting around his front porch to-morrow morning to grab the newsheet to see it's got all his wise-cracks set out, and what the camera man made of the bulge around his evening pants."

The acid of it was tempered by the laughing humour in the woman's keen black eyes that had once been more than pretty. Sarah found herself laughing, too. They chuckled together. They were old in their liking for each other. And the more kindly Sarah tried to forget the vitriol for the humour which did its best to soften the other's cynicism.

"I hate your wicked tongue, Kitty," Sarah laughed. "One day they'll burn you for a witch or something in Blacktail. You miss the reality, dear. It's not altogether vanity. It looks to me self-defence as much as anything." She gazed out from behind the gold laced curtains, scanning the crowded dancing space. "It seems such a pity the folk who

do things don't go right on doing them till they die. I always hope that of my Benny."

A titter broke in on her. But she went on unnoticed.

"If ever I'd made a big noise in the world I'm sadly afraid I'd want to 'tell the world' I wasn't dead, only retired. Vanity? Surely, in a way. But self-defence mainly. And altogether human. You know, Kitty, you couldn't have kept me away from this to-night. Self-defence again, my dear. We're getting old. And now, someways, I'm sorry I came."

Kate Myer's vitriol flowed instantly. But without its wonted humour.

"You don't have to tell me, Sarah," she exclaimed with a gesture of tenacious hands that were beautifully cared for. "We think young, and try to look young. But when we start to act that way we get one almighty jolt. We just don't belong." The gleaming polish of her finger nails shone as she indicated the dancing floor. "Used to be the Polo Club Ball. And the Rancher's Club Ball. Now it flies a grain flag. We've been coming in to 'em nearly thirty years. And in those times we yearned like kid girls just got man-conscious. Look at it. Then it was a clean, wholesome, physical romp. Polka. Gallop. Quadrille. Now its sexual and sensual. Now it's mooning round a crowded floor by inches, bodies hugged tight, and minds drunk with worse than liquor, while they pretend rhythm. My doctor man says we're at the start of an age of frank beastliness under the guise of sex comradeship. Says, kids are nearer being crazy animals than they've been since the days of Lot's wife."

Sarah shook her greying head with her tolerance exhausted.

"That's—that's just too deplorable, Kitty," she said coldly. "You've no right. I can't think where you get such terrible, terrible cynicism. I—"

"Try being a doctor's wife in a prairie village. Any old village where there's only the play they can invent," Kate

snapped, with a shrug of angular shoulders. "You won't need to guess. Doc's no saint, as you know. But he gets sick watching it." She nodded a head at the slowly moving crowd beyond the curtain. "Look at your Roddy. My, he's a great feller and looks swell in his college evening clothes and boiled shirt. He's not dancing with Billee either. She's grabbing one of the Cockerill boys. Say, how in the world Grant and Hester ever gave her that gorgeous hair and those lovely, lovely eyes I can't think. I don't see Nick anywhere."

The two greying heads craned together searching the slowly gyrating crowd. In spite of advancing years and scornful criticism they loved the sight of it. To Sarah, whatever the other saw in it, it was an expression of youth. And as such it was more than beautiful in her kindly eyes.

Sarah had not the other's interest in discovering the missing Nick. All her attention was given to Rodney and Billee. She was even glad Nick was not visible. Her only regret at the moment was that Rodney and Billee were not dancing together. She wished—but she was always wishing and hoping where the boy and girl were concerned.

The band crashed out final bars. A saxophone coughed a succession of sounds which pleased the dancers. There was happy laughter and applause as the crowd disintegrated and spread itself in the direction of every available resting place. Sarah saw Rodney detach himself from a partner who matched his immense physique.

Kate Myer's scandalous tongue remained mute. She was more deeply interested than she would have admitted. Quite half the dancers were either friends or known to her by reputation. She was the type which accumulates acquaintances and knowledge of people. But she was genuinely seeking to discover Nick as a means of introducing a fresh topic for her flaying tongue.

"No," she said at last. "He's not dancing or looking on. Now I wonder which it is. What your Benny always prefers to call 'hooch'? Or has he gone off with the Doc for a game?"

I'll bet a dollar it's one or the other. Likely a game. Can't see my doctor man either."

She waited. Her face remained turned on the scene of resting dancers. And Sarah fell for the bait held out.

"I expect he's just sitting out somewhere," she said indifferently. Then as an afterthought: "It won't be drink or 'draw,'" she said emphatically. "Billee was telling me he'd made a real clean-up that way."

"Clean-up? Don't make me laugh, Sarah!"

Kate's eyes were wide with scornful incredulity. And the light from the dance floor discovered them with a sort of radiance in their jetty black. Her lips were hard set.

"Can a wolf make a clean-up of the stuff bred into it?" she asked, with a laugh that was wholly wicked. "I lose patience, Sarah. Some of you are so good you'd fix a devil with wings and halo. That boy didn't matter with Hester alive. Hester could handle anything with pants on it, and set it where it belonged. Besides, he was her play. But she's dead and she's left behind her two folks with no more sense than to shoulder the craziness she passed to them. I'm kind of sorry. Though Grant, I guess, when the break comes, is the sort to handle it the way it needs. But Billee?" Her expressive hands told her feelings. "I'm scared, Sarah. I'm scared to death for that kid with those eyes and that hair and figure. I'd like to do a lot. I'd like to set her where that wolf kid couldn't get near. Billee's got the whelp of a killer on her hands and fingers are likely to get badly burnt. You can't tell me. No one can. That dark-skinned good-looker's crazy for her. And a killer father's looking out of those laughing black eyes of his all the time. I wish to God, Sally, you and Benny had been able to pass your Roddy a face like yours." She laughed. "But you couldn't. No. With your Benny around you had to pass him a sort of cubist effect." Her laugh passed. And her hard mouth clamped. "So the child's left up against a wolf with all the makings."

Sarah shook her head coldly but her eyes were troubled.

"What do you mean—makings? What of?" she asked sharply.

"The killer—his father was. And just all that implies."

Sarah learnt forward on the upholstered front of the box.

"That's the sort of view I'd call extreme, grossly extreme, unfair, and entirely wrong through prejudice," she said, roused to sharp defence. "Nick's had college, and did well. Outside the game, that don't seem wrong for your man to play, and the stuff the best of men around here drink, Nick doesn't show a thing to say he's going to follow any black-leg outlaw father. He's honest. He's good-natured. A bright, cheerful, laughing—"

"And just that much the more deadly to be around Billee."

Sarah shook her head with decision. And her fine eyes sparkled.

"You're so wrong, Kitty," she cried. "You don't know the poor lone fellow."

"But the Doc does. So does Mathersbee. So do all the folks around Blacktail. And they're—"

But the nasal tones broke off. And that which the woman intended to say in support of her verdict remained unspoken. The door of the box was pushed open to admit Rodney and Billee.

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Sarah beamed. The boy and girl were together. Kate Myer considered the pair with friendly appraising. Kate was a good enough, but disillusioned, woman who regretted her own advancing years and deplored an early youth which had been anything but happy. But she loved the red-gold beauty of Billee, and thought worlds of the strength and downright honesty looking out of what she had proclaimed to be Rodney's cubist face.

"Oh, you two darlings, isn't it a lovely, lovely party?" Billee exclaimed, sitting down between these two older

woman, and possessing herself of a hand of each of them. "Oh, dear," she went on, her eyes sparkling. "I've—I've had a proposal. Or I think it was one. No, Auntie," in response to the eager question in Sarah Hyles' smiling eyes, "I'm not going to say who from. That wouldn't be playing the game. Would it, Roddy?" she enquired appealingly. "You see, it was so—so quaint. He kept an extra tight hold of me while we danced, as though he guessed I'd break away instanter. But I hadn't a notion of it. I wanted to hear it all. It was so quaint. He said: 'See right here, kid, I'm fed to the gills. You haven't any sort of right to be mixed with the sort of dirt that's lying around your way. You just don't know the thing you're up against. I've harvested forty bushels to the acre. No. I hard. And I'm right on top of my luck. I'm building a swell house, with porch and steam heat. What say? You fix up with me, and you'll be a leadin' show-piece of Calford society in a coupla years. I'm just crazy about you.' You know I liked the forthright way of it. That boy's the sort who'd beat a woman over the head with a club. Or, maybe, ride off with her slung across the back of his saddle."

Kate's eyes sparkled.

"I don't need to guess," she nodded grimly

"I don't like these rough prairie ways," Sarah protested unsmilingly. "I do hope you—"

"No I didn't, Auntie," Billee laughed. "I understood the boy. Read clear through him. He was badly worried and meant well. So I just told him he was a nice boy who oughtn't to burden himself with a wife on one good harvest. And it wasn't good policy putting a bunch of money into his house till he'd got a bigger land holding and had tried it right out under wheat. Then I didn't want to laugh or anything when I saw his face fall."

"Bully! Good for you, Billee," Rodney approved quietly. "I'm glad you were kind to him. Young Ned Cockerill's a rough diamond, but a good one. He's one

good farmer, too. A hustler. Did he tell you he wanted to volunteer for Europe?"

Billee smiled round at the big creature behind her. And his reward was in her eyes. Perhaps, in the shadow of the box, he was unaware of it. But it was there.

Billee shook her head.

"That's too bad giving him away, Roddy. But he didn't."

Rodney's big shoulders moved.

"We don't think less of him for wanting to marry you, so long as—you don't marry him. But he's asked me to help him get across."

"Well, I'm very glad you turned him down, child," Sarah said uncompromisingly. "I don't think I like the casual way boys ask girls to marry them nowadays."

Kate Myer turned to Rodney and looked shrewdly up into his face.

"I haven't seen young Nick dancing," she said. "What's become of him?"

But it was Billee who responded. It was instant and uneasy.

"I hadn't noticed Nick," she said quickly. "I never looked to see. I was enjoying myself so much. You sure he hasn't been dancing? He can't—"

The nasal tones broke in on her.

"I saw him talking with Will Hardy two hours back," Kate said. "I saw my doctor man around, too. I haven't seen either since. Nor Will Hardy. If he's gone with Will Hardy good-bye to that clean-up he's made, my girl."

Billee turned to Rodney.

"Roddy, be a darling!" she cried. "Go and hunt around. I don't want— Bring him back here. I'll be waiting for you."

The girl's anxiety was very real. And Rodney nodded and passed out of the box without a word.

Much of Billee's delight and excited joy had departed while she sat with Auntie Sarah and Kate Myer. She talked while two pairs of eyes were narrowly observing her. But she sprang up from her chair on the instant at a sound beyond the door of the box. It was in a manner which proclaimed that she had been anxiously waiting, and listening intently.

Rodney entered the box. He was alone. Billee realized the significance of it even as she flung her enquiry.

"Well?"

Rodney shook his head.

"Left word with the door man," he said. "Said we weren't to wait for him. Might be very late."

"Did he say where he was going?"

"No. That's all the word he left."

Kate Myer gestured.

"You don't need more, child," she cried. "It'll be Will Hardy's apartment. And a pretty big game. He'll get back home with his bank roll thin unless the doctor can hold him. But I haven't ever known my doctor man fond of checking up anybody who fancies parting from his chips."

It was harsh with bitterness. And the bitterest of it lay in her final reference to her own man. In all the years they had known her it was the first time any of them had heard Kate Myer's vicious tongue turned upon her husband.

CHAPTER VIII

The Wager

BILLEE WAS AN ARDENT DAN-

cer. All the youth in her yearned for the seductive rhythm which intoxicated her. She had planned her evening at the Harvest Ball with gay enthusiasm. She had started at the very beginning of the programme, and had had no intention of yielding till the last grunt of an appealing saxophone had expired. Rodney had understood. His mother had understood. And between them they were intent that Billee should miss nothing of the joy of it all.

But the ill-news of Nick had confounded Billee. It had robbed her evening of all its savour.

The girl was grievously troubled. Always before her mind was the memory of those bad cheques. Then there was the thought of her exasperated father's threatening attitude towards him. But worst of all there was the man's treachery to herself.

Nick had callously broken his solemn pledge to her. He had made no secret of it. That pledge which had nearly bankrupted her financial resources. And which she, like the veriest credulous simpleton, had accepted as an expression of a man's honour.

Billee sought comfort in excuse for her childhood's playmate. But it was all quite, quite useless. There was no excuse. There could be none. Besides, always at the back of her mind was the haunting shadow of an ugly memory. She knew Nick's deplorable origin. The whole hateful story of it.

No word of that story had ever passed her dead mother's lips within her hearing. Her father had always remained mute upon the subject. But it had been different with the

mischievous tongues in Blacktail. As with an unyielding Live Oak, who, where cattle and horse thieves were concerned, was utterly without mercy. In conjunction with Nick's present doings it turned her loyal heart sick.

Billee took an impulsive decision because her feelings impelled and made any other course impossible. She scrupulously fulfilled her dance engagements up to the moment of the supper for which she was pledged to Rodney. Aunt Sarah and Kate Myer joined them for it in the great saloon, which, at other times, served the theatre as its ordinary public refreshment room. But it was not until the end of the second supper dance that she permitted her decision to become apparent.

It came as Rodney was almost shouldering a passage for the girl through the dense throng which was similarly making its way back to the supper tables. And it came in a fashion which left Rodney in no sort of doubt.

Billee's red-gold head was somewhere about the level of Rodney's shoulder. And she glanced up at him with a little whimsical flash of her eyes.

"I think Auntie Sarah's looking just too tired, Roddy," she announced, and waited.

There was no sign of any surprise in the man. He dodged a dallying couple to pass ahead of them, and agreed.

"Sure," he said. "Ma's not used. And I guess she's not young, either. She's had one mighty long day before starting out. That's her way. A party. So she guesses to do a whole lot to make up for it."

His eyes were smiling down at her. And Billee felt like hugging the huge arm to which she was clinging. She knew that Rodney, too, was pretending.

"Yes, I love her," she said simply. "What do we do about it?"

They had reached the gilded archway which revealed the brilliant supper-room beyond. Billee had a distant

view of two greying heads leaning together at their far table. The vitriolic Kate was gesticulating. And there was not a vestige of weariness apparent in either. Billee promptly abandoned all pretence as they passed under the archway.

"Oh, it's no use, Roddy," she said distressedly. "There's hours more dancing, and—and I haven't the heart for any of it. They're just bleak to me now, like the grey glaciers back of home. There's going to be trouble. All sorts of trouble. I know that. Nick! And I think I want to get home. Where I can't see it. And where folks can't see, either."

Rodney, however, persisted in his pretence.

"I'd say Ma's all for oysters even though you don't get them on the half-shell in Calford," he smiled, gazing ahead at the two women engrossed in their talk and their supper. "When they get through I'll go pick up the automobile and run it around. I'll have to see she rests all day tomorrow," he added with a shake of the head.

The impulse was too strong for her. Billee squeezed the mass of muscle on which her slim hand was resting.

"You're a wonder, Roddy," she said softly. "I'm a fool girl. And you haven't told me so. Is there anything you don't understand—ever?"

"Quite a lot."

The man regarded her up-turned face steadily as he went on.

"Why that darn fool Nick paid a feller like Doc Myer with 'scrap' paper last time they played?" he said in a tone. "And how much he looted from your pocket-book to set himself straight with the bank? You see, kid," he explained more gently, as Billee stared in horrified amazement. "Doc's not crazy for Nick like you are. He took the boy's paper when he knew he hadn't the stuff to meet it with. He was quite aware Nick couldn't clean it up. But he knew someone else would. Then it gave him something

to open that shark's mouth of his about. I'd say Doc Myer is like that other bird that fancies cleaning up dead bones."

"Oh, Roddy!"

The girl's distress was well nigh tearful. Rodney knew of those cheques! Then so did everyone else! Her father! Had he heard? She went on with a rush.

"Oh, he's just a fool, crazy kid," she cried, in defensive helplessness. "I know. It's—it's not wickedness. It's just that. And I'm scared what'll happen at—at that place to-night. Will Hardy's no better than a gambler crook. Just one big sharp. The Doc's no better. And—and we don't know who else there'll be. They know my Daddy's loaded with dollars. And they're counting on that. Don't you see? They'll skin Nick for every dollar they can get him to sign for. And—and he swore to me he'd never sit in with the Doc ever again."

The approach to their table suddenly became blocked by a group in a hurry. Rodney took advantage of it.

"Shall I go along to Hardy's apartment and haul him right back here?" he asked. "Just say it, Billee."

But Billee shook a vigorous head.

"No, Roddy. But thanks," she said softly. "It's like you. But you'd do no good. I know Nick. He's just mad when he gets started. And those others. Do you think they'll stand for interference in their private party? Would the vulture let you rob it of its carrion? Men-things in a mix up? No." Again she shook her head vigorously. "I can't stand for that. But those boys are going to get badly bitten. Daddy's sheer on edge. And I can't help Nick any more. I think it's Daddy I'm afraid of more than any of them."

"Why?"

It was different. There was a hardness in it that was startling. And Billee reacted to it with all the woman in her. She wanted to challenge the tone of it, which she read unerringly. But the impulse died even at its birth.

"Nick's just my foster-brother. That's all," she said simply, instead.

There was a moment of pregnant silence. Then she went on with a little mirthless laugh.

"Do you think Auntie will be disappointed? I'm worried."

The further obstruction had cleared itself. And as they pressed forward Rodney laughed his relief.

"You don't have to worry for anything, Billee," he assured, in the confident manner of some big creature conscious of its own protective strength. "Just pass your worries along to me. Ma included. I guess Ma, with a horn of champagne under her dear old belt, isn't the sort to get fussed if the stars drop out, or a full moon falls through."

Billee was almost comforted as she sat with Rodney beside her low under the windscreen of a machine that rode its smoothest at fifty miles an hour. Billee never questioned herself on the subject. She had adored the dull-witted doll which she had once called "Roddy boy." And the only difference she knew now was that the "Roddy boy" of her childhood's play games was a big, strong, plain man, and he was there beside her.

The prairie night was sharply chill. It was brilliant, too. Brilliant with that full moon Rodney had mentioned. And with a blaze of astral jewels which literally peppered the cloudless heavens. It was an early Indian summer night that was keenly conscious of the frigid season yet to come.

Billee was warmly muffled. She was almost up to her pretty eyes in the comfort of her high-collared beaver coat. Her fur cap was pulled low on her head. And her satin-shod feet were deep buried in a fur muff which had once been a timber wolf with the temerity to range the woods in proximity to Coppermine's quarters. In the cold

radiance of a gorgeous moon she was a picture whose attraction for the man beside her was infinitely greater than the path of light with which the automobile's head-lights flooded the prairie trail.

Sarah's concern for Nick did not extend to regret at his absence on the home journey. She had the vehicle's back seat to herself, under a second windscreen. She, too, was warmly clad in furs. And she sat back blissfully indifferent to everything but the back of the two heads in front of her. Maternal hopes were in the ascendant. While bodily comfort induced a somnolence she made no attempt to resist.

They had left the last of Calford's straggling suburbs far behind them, and the engine was responding gallantly to the chill of the night air. They rode each vast, immobile wave of the sea of grass and grain as though the machine were revelling in its task. Billee knew a great sense of satisfaction in the impulse which had prompted her early return home. Yielding to the influence of Rodney's presence she felt that her fears for Nick were probably extravagant.

The moving indicator of the speedometer and the confidence of the man's mitted hands on his steering wheel were things which fascinated Billee. It was always the same. Rodney radiated undemonstrative capacity.

The girl knew a little thrill as the pointer passed the sixty mile mark. And only had she admiration for the big creature beside her who was pressing the machine, and asking it for more. To her mind his attitude towards his automobile was one of caress. And she laughed and challenged him.

"You know, Roddy, you're a bit of a renegade some-ways," she declared. "You've deserted your early love. You've gone right over. Turned it all down for soulless steel and stuff." She shook her head. "No. I don't believe you could throw a rope any more. Do you remember how we used to pull a yearling down by its fore legs for

branding? You couldn't rope them that way now. And as for weeks in the hills on a spring round-up, why you'd hate it. I remember when your big idea was to carry all argument in a couple of holsters, like Live Oak and Uncle Benny. When there wasn't a thing to matter so you'd four live legs under your saddle, and a rope slung at its horn. Has it all gone? Have you outgrown those days? Has modern movement got you? This machine lives in your mind, I guess. I ought to be disappointed. Only I'm not."

Rodney turned a swift, smiling glance at the laughing eyes framed in the girl's furs. His pulses were astir. But he turned back at once to the trail ahead remembering his responsibility.

"Why should you be, anyway?" he asked. "Renegade! That the right word, kid?" He smiled into the path of light ahead. "I don't know. Maybe. Yes, I've turned down a lot of early notions. But not all. You see, Billee, it looks to me life can't ever stand still. If you don't go on you've got to go back. It's like this mix-up in Europe. There's a hell of a lot of killing. Bunches of grief and heartache. Pain. Suffering. Waste. But it's part of the onward move of life. And we've got to have it or sit back, a world of flapdoodle cranks who just won't do a thing to work out the schemes of life but eat, and soak, and breed things worse than ourselves. Well, grain and machines looked to me like going forward. So I went. Even Benny saw that way. And Live Oak. But it don't seem to me that grain and machine stuff's sufficient. So I'm joining in the scrap over there. Down East they're talking of raising a bunch of boys to send 'em over to pass our little old country a hand. I've asked to get a commission with it."

"Roddy!"

Billee was sitting up in her seat. It was as though his final announcement had jolted her out of her mood of banter. Her eyes were shining. She was vividly startled. But it was happily startled.

"And you never said a word, Roddy—to anybody!" she reproached.

Rodney was smiling ahead, far into the night.

"Only Ma," he said, deliberately disregarding the reproach. "She knows," he laughed. "Ma's a good one to tell when you aren't too sure of things. She's the sort you couldn't rattle except by killing Benny. And she's got a head for straight thinking that makes you wonder. You see, Benny and Live Oak 'll need to play renegade when I quit, so—" He gestured with an expressive hand,—"that only left you who signified."

"Oh, Roddy, I'm so glad!" Billee broke in on him, in a burst of real enthusiasm. "So—so glad! You of all people. A Kentuckian. Not even Canadian. Oh, yes you are," she declared, as a protesting hand lifted from the wheel. "You were born in these hills. But you're a United States citizen all the same, born of United States parents. Yet you're the first man I've heard of around Calford who wants to go and help our little old country in its worry. My! I feel like I could cry with gladness!"

Rodney changed down in face of a long, punishing ascent.

"You don't have to be too glad though, Billee," he demurred slyly. "I feel awful good about a swell scrap. There's not a lot doing that way raising grain with folks who're not worried with the sort of face a boy can't help. I just kept you to tell till right now so you wouldn't get all fussed for the mossback hoe-down in Calford. Maybe leaving you till now 'll make it a bit late for you to get ready for the wedding. You see, I expect to get word to join up right after Coppermine's left your Iron Bolt away down the Cup course on Saturday."

The automobile was climbing laboriously. Rodney caught a glimpse of the girl's suddenly widened eyes in the driving mirror. He saw amazement, incredulity, laughter, in her eyes. And his lips quirked with humour while he waited.

It came. It came in just the way he would have had it. It thrilled with a scorn he knew to be make believe.

"Wedding?" she cried. And he nodded.

"Yours and mine. In fact—ours."

Laughter banished everything else from the girl's shining eyes.

"Oh, Roddy, you are—are an idiot! For goodness sake don't get weak and feeble before they shoot you to death with shrapnel or something over there. Marry you? Me? When you talk of your Coppermine leaving my Iron Bolt down the Cup course? Why, we're bitter rivals, adversaries, enemies! I should say not. Besides—"

"Besides?"

Rodney remained quite undisturbed.

"You're going right over there where they're blowing half the world to bits. And I'm not marrying any prospective corpse."

Billee chuckled gleefully despite her forceful denial.

"Oh, dear. You are a funny big thing, Roddy," she went on. "You're just like that kid doll I used to set around with the others. What are you joining up with? Must be commissariat, seeing you're all for wheat."

Rodney shook his head as he changed up. They were at the crest of the hill with a sharp descent beyond.

"No. Machinery—guns."

Billee made no reply. She was gazing ahead, far out into the night, where the valley below them looked utterly black in contrast with the brilliant glow of the headlights. Somehow, for once in her life, she found it easier to look straight ahead than round at the man beside her.

Rodney gave a short laugh.

"I'm not playing, kid," he said, in a low tone that had something unusual in it. "I've always wanted you. You see, there's more love to the square inch of me than'll let any fool man keep sane. And," he added, with a sigh, "there's such a hell of a lot of me. Don't let's fool. When?"

A hand left the wheel as the machine gathered reckless

speed. It reached out and possessed itself of the small hands clasped in the girl's lap. They were unresisting. Billee had thought, wondered, dreamed, for years. Now she knew. She loved the warmth of the hand that fell on hers. But the tremor she felt in it ravished her.

It was all in a moment. The strong hand held. The automobile swerved perilously, and bumped and jolted as it mounted the grass at the trail side. Then came a voice in sleepy protest from the back seat.

"Oh, do be careful, Roddy. Whatever are you doing?"

Billee's spell broke. All the latent mischief in her leapt. She released the hands which a moment before had been clinging. And she called back to the scarcely awakened Sarah as Rodney recovered his control.

"He's asking me to marry him, and I can't get him to see sense," she cried. "I've told him we're ruthless enemies! We hate each other. That marrying him's unthinkable. Why, if the folks in Calford knew I was going to marry him nobody would believe the Cup race was straight! They'd—they'd—! What are we going to do about it, Auntie, darling?"

"Better make a bet of it."

It came with a sleepy chuckle. And somehow it seemed to fit in with the girl's happy mood. Forthwith Billee seized upon the suggestion with all the irresponsibility of a child.

"Oh, Auntie!" she cried. "What a gorgeous notion. It must be those oysters. Roddy said how clever you were. And how nothing but killing Uncle Benny would rattle you. Of course. We'll make it a bet. What a thrill!"

She turned to the man at her side, her eyes bright with the joy of life. He was watching the trail. He was holding the racing vehicle to the hard beaten surface of it.

"Don't pretend, Roddy," she taunted. "You heard all right. Now prove your sportsmanship. A bet. You can't marry me if your old cayuse Coppermine isn't a better

horse than my lovely, lovely Iron Bolt and wins the Cup from him. Are you game?"

Rodney sobered the pace with his hand brake. He grinned and nodded.

"Sure, little kid," he said, on the instant. "Easy. That goes."

Billee cocked a doubtful eye as she surveyed the angular profile searchingly.

"Oh, does it?" she mocked. "Easy, eh? So conceitedly confident, that—"

She broke off. There was a moment of deliberation. Then, of a sudden, she looked back into the rear of the car. "But Auntie darling," she complained. "What happens to us when Iron Bolt wins?"

There was no response beyond the deep breathing which could be heard above the purr of the powerful engine. Aunt Sarah was profoundly slumbering.

CHAPTER IX

A Frame-Up

IT WAS WELL PAST MIDNIGHT, and the game had been in progress for upwards of two hours. The air was heavy with the reek of green cigars. There was, too, the unmistakable odour of a lavish consumption of alcohol. The game had been hushed to the barest needs of its play. For all five of the men at the table were ardent devotees of draw-poker.

Will Hardy's apartment was luxurious. A rose-tinted scheme of lighting was concentrated upon a table whose equipment suggested games of an even wider gambling scope. It had an alluring effect. It even came near to softening the expression of faces belonging to the hard-horned legion of Calford's gambling warriors. A buffet was flung across one far corner of the room, and was generously laden with delectable food resources. There were deep lounging chairs set in its neighbourhood, each with the accompaniment of a table of inconspicuous size.

Will Hardy had just dealt. It was a heavily straddled jack-pot. Doc Myer, sitting next, had opened it, making it twenty dollars to come in. Al Fisher was next to him. A wiry-framed racing man who toured the western circuit of country race-tracks with a string of horses which never ran on their merits. He grumbled at the opening price and came in. Nick Woodley followed. For an undecided moment Nick fingered his chips. Then he pushed them across to the swelling pot without a word. Tubby Williams was an obscure saloon-keeper in a remoter part of the city. He spoke asthmatically out of a thick neck, and refused. Only Will Hardy displayed any lightness.

"You're too hot, Doc," he smiled amiably, as he threw

in his hand. "I don't like your twenty bucks, and want no truck with 'em. Get right after it while I fix the gargle."

He stood up good to look at. He was large and lean in well cut evening clothes. There was grey in his crisply curling dark hair, and a tracery of fine lines about a clean-shaven mouth which shut tight when he finished speaking. But these were no more than the branding of a life in which the "downs" were more frequent and prolonged than the "ups."

Generally speaking Calford accepted Will Hardy at his own value. It vaguely supposed him to be a wealthy, financial manipulator of stock-markets, who chose to centre himself in the rich heart of the grain country. It regarded him as a sportsman. It had evidence that he was a lavish host. And rumour hinted at friends and connections in extremely high places.

In reality, however, Will Hardy **was** that type which a boom city never fails to attract. The man of suave effrontery, and a few other assets. He had a perfect understanding of raw human nature. He had an easy culture, capable adjustment as circumstance **arose**. He had the attraction of a genial good-looker.

There were other assets which were not always apparent. He possessed an iron nerve. A cold, inflexible purpose. Nimble fingers where cards were concerned. And an arsenal of lethal weapons which had served him efficiently in the past, and would doubtless continue to do so in the future. In brief he was precisely what Billee had declared him to be at the Harvest Ball. A gambler-crook.

It was Will Hardy's purpose to put over the "social stunt" with an unsuspecting farming population. To gather to his palatial apartment a rich clientele of the "dollar Reubs," as he affectionately dubbed them, who would be ready to accept the losing of a few thousand dollars at an evening party as part of the social duty expected of them. And for some years he had got away with it.

Consequently his present party should have been significant. It was a "stag" gathering. Doc Myer was, of course, an intimate. Young Nick, socially at least, was desirable. But Al Fisher and the asthmatic Tubby were the sort who would discover no detriment in spitting on a Turkey rug however costly.

Hardy listened acutely to the almost monosyllabic betting as he moved between table and buffet replenishing the glasses of his guests. Nor did he return to his place at the table till Doc Myer revealed his "openers" and threw in his hand.

He dropped into his chair with a quick glance across at the cropped bullet head of the racing man, who, with Nick, remained in the game. It was only momentary. But Al's round pale eyes encountered his before they turned upon his remaining antagonist.

"Hell!" he ejaculated grumbly. "I got the Doc scared out all right. But this—"

He set a stack of chips in the pot.

"Chew on that, kid feller," he grinned. "That sees you with a two hundred 'rise.' "

Nick Woodley's clean-cut youth was like a jewel in a rough setting between the racing man and the saloon-keeper. But if he were a lamb among wolves he gave no impression of it.

His cards were closed, and faced down on the green of the table. One well-cared-for hand was outspread over them. He fingered chips, considering. But he made no reply until he pushed them into the pot from a stack that indicated that the tide of his luck was in full flood.

"I'll see that," he said coolly, "and put it up five hundred."

Hardy sighed relief. And he laughed as he sat back in his chair blowing smoke from a freshly lit cigar.

"Come again, Mister man," he chuckled tauntingly at the copper-hued face of his racing friend.

Al Fisher chewed the mangled end of his cigar. One

tight-shut fist drummed gently on the edge of the table. Doc Myer and Tubby gazed with cold-eyed interest.

The man's doubt was only momentary. He jerked a pair of narrow shoulders under his worn evening jacket.

"I dunno!" he ejaculated. "Have it your way, kid feller." He counted chips. "Five hundred to see an' raise."

There was a faint stirring round the table. It was that expression of nerves so common when big sums are staked on what looks to be a chance. Nick's reply was swift.

"Same here," he sparred. And counted high-priced chips.

There was a tone in it which seemed to draw a head-shake of disapproval from the gambler at the head of his table. But the headshake may have had other meaning. At any rate Al Fisher made no lament as he counted chips.

"I'll see that," he snapped. And pushed five hundred into the swollen pot.

Nick turned his cards. He "fanned" them open on the table. Al reached and separated them for inspection. Then the bullet that was his cropped head shook.

"Too good, kid feller," he sighed heavily. And flung his own unrevealed hand into the deadwood. "A pat Royal! Christ!" He flung up his uncared-for hands. "If you don't die young there won't be dollars to go round. Take the lousy stuff away while I can keep my hands from grabbin'."

Nick collected and sorted. Doc Myer prepared for a fresh deal. But Hardy shook his head.

"You asked for it, Al," he said, talking across at the defeated racing man. "You should have saved a couple of thousand. Woodley sat 'Pat.' You drew three. It was an opened jack-pot. Well? Looks easy to me. You hadn't right but for a feeler bet. You most certainly hadn't. Guess we'll lay off t'eat," he shrugged. "There's hours yet till the Doc needs to collect his missus."

He turned on Nick with smiling approval.

"Looks like you've cleaned up quite a bunch," he said.

"Three thousand or so. I'll say you've a nice touch for the game, boy. You deserve it. Anyway I can feel good you didn't pull it out of mine."

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There was little ceremony and few enough manners. Will Hardy had adapted himself to the circumstance of Al Fisher and Tubby Williams. He had switched on more light. He had set the fans clearing the reek of the room. They were foregathered in deep chairs. And the buffet had yielded to hungry and thirsty assault.

Nick found himself between his host and the man he had defeated. Doc Myer had the asthmatic saloonkeeper on his capable hands and faced him. They had argued as they ate and drank. And their victim, Al Fisher, was irked. With an ugly mouth full of savoury sandwich he turned to Nick.

"It's one o' them things I gener'ly notice," he observed plaintively. "The one with the most right ain't said a thing to tell me to get right out of my Mammy's lap. If we talk hosses 'stead of mean chips mabbe we'll get somewhere. I'm gettin' to feel mean."

Hardy smiled broadly at the round eyes in their copper setting.

"Not a haf as mean as you'd feel if you ran your string of cayuses the way you bet your cards. Man, you wouldn't eat good."

The pale eyes blinked.

"That's all right, Will," Al retorted patiently. "I'm still eatin' good. Better than a bunch 'll eat if the thing they're telling me is right. It's that colt of yours, Woodley." He turned sharp eyes on Nick. "Easy money for your Calford Cup. Ain't it? That so?"

Nick returned his glass containing French brandy of good quality to the adjacent table. He lit a cigarette and inhaled luxuriously. A supreme content pervaded him. He

was wholly unrepentant that he had broken his pledge to Billee.

He nodded.

"I'd say so," he assured confidently. "We've clocked to win with a bunch to spare. The Lazy S. isn't worried a thing."

Fisher ate some more

"So they're telling me. The wise ones," he meditated. He nodded with decision. "Well, I'd say that dandy kid of Grant Wilford's should have a good line on it. Pulled the Cup last year with your 'Jane of the River.' Say, she's got hands. I watched her. I'm sure looking for something easy so I can eat good."

Nick picked up a sandwich from his table. He bit into it aware of the gaze of which he was the centre.

"Our camp's full of money for the Bolt. And—for nothing else," he said, with an air.

But the racing man's head negated slowly.

"That's swell hearing, kid feller," he said. "But you're the owners. Tubby, there, sings another darn chorus. Doubting Thomas. I'd say. Guesses ther' ain't a thing around with the legs of some darn colt with a Kentucky Kid line to it. Laid it so he looks he's never goin' t'eat again, good or bad. How's its name anyway, Tubby?"

Tubby withdrew a flattened nose from the inside of a glass whose contents were sluicing down a mouthful of sandwich. He gazed round him with bloodshot eyes that came to rest on the dark, confident smile in Nick's fine eyes.

"Coppermine," he coughed huskily from somewhere about the roots of a neck that was almost a goitre.

"Sure," returned Al. "Knew it was some darn mine. An' it don't look like a gold mine either, eh, Tubby?"

Tubby applied fresh drink to his glass.

"That Benny Hyles an' Live Oak bunch. Sharps!" he gasped. "Guess the darn Cup's their's, too."

"I dunno," Al meditated. "Looks to me all the folks around this rotten burg make a tight corporation. They own the blamed Cup to the last man an' the last kid. Looks like there's yeller somewhere. Set up a race-track week with its plum set close to mean bosoms. That Cup? What's it worth? Two hundred on the entry sweep, with ten thousand God Almighty dollars added. Fifteen thousand or so. For homebreds. With catch-weights! An' men an' females ridin'! What a cinch! What a hell of a cinch! Only they keep the door shut tight on us, an' have us goin' round an' round for measly cents. Guess I'll need to step around an' grow a patch of grain."

Nick found the man's complaint amusing.

"But you've got it wrong," he laughed. "We grow horses as well as grain."

Hardy's agreement came readily. Almost too readily.

"That's so, Al. Woodley's certainly right," he said, "and they're the sort of flesh to make your mean string look like dog meat. When it comes to the race-track you've nothing on even kids of this city."

"Christ! Looks like I'm wrong again," Al sighed, with perfect good-humour. "Still I'd feel good if I could clear Tubby here of the nightmare he's dreaming. It's that darn Goldmine hoss. Tell us, Tubby?"

Tubby's shoulders bestirred in what should have been a shrug but was merely an elephantine heaving. Two stout arms reached out with his stubby thumbs turned down.

"I'm payin' the whole darn world on that Coppermine hoss," he declared in a sombre wheeze. "If they ain't all crazy Woodley's clock's got to be a born liar. I got a book full of that four legged spoon. An' I can't locate a sucker from here to the coast who'll buy me off a nickel of it at any price. If the fool hoss don't fall dead in his tracks next Saturday I guess you can grab my corp in mine."

Tubby stared redly at the laughter that broke at his expense. Nick grinned as he replied to him.

"We'll find that stiff all right," he said. "Our clock couldn't lie if Ananias handled it."

"Guess I'll need to get my epitaph wrote then," Tubby moaned, as he raised his replenished glass.

"I'm not a racing sharp like you folks," Hardy put in smoothly. "I'd say the Doc, here, and I run in a team. We like results. Looking to jump in on something easy. Something so live it can't drop dead in its tracks the way Tubby's talking. I haven't heard Calford's bughouse needs enlarging. And when it comes to dollars the folk around seem to know about them. I wonder what else they know. Will they skin Tubby to death."

Nick found himself the centre for all eyes and liked it. He was there to tell these clever ones. Smooth French brandy was reacting. He would tell them. Tell them in a way they would not misunderstand. He laughed supreme confidence and inhaled his cigarette with an air. He was turned to Hardy although addressing himself elsewhere.

"You said I'd pulled in three thousand or so," he said, his eyes shining. "Well, there's only two horses in the Cup on Saturday. That's generally admitted. Benny's Copper-mine and our Bolt horse. I want to save poor Tubby's life. So he can book me three thousand Iron Bolt. And I want two to one."

Doc Myer shot a keen look round as Tubby's asthmatic wheeze preceded his swift acceptance.

"It's a bet," he gasped as though hurry had left him breathless.

Nick nodded while the racing man drained a stiff drink.

"Hell!" Al exploded with his last gulp, setting his glass clattering on the table. "This don't get us anywhere. Any blame fool can throw a bet. Why not fix it—sure?"

Nick's smile passed as the pale eyes gazed narrowly into his.

"Fix it?" Hardy's brows went up mildly questioning. "What precisely do you mean by that, Al?"

The racing man pointed to Nick.

"The kid feller here's game," he snapped. "All sorts of grit. He's dead sure. So he's splashed three thousand to convince Tubby he ain't passin' the maggots a feed. Well, I got to tell him he's no more sure for puttin' over that gamble. His clock ain't sure neither. Nor ain't that dandy kid gal with hands like velvet. There ain't a thing sure to the race-track with two hosses runnin' over it. Will an' the Doc here's lookin' for easy money. Come to that I guess we all are. I'm white-headed in the game an' I know. If we reckon to rake in the antes without a bet there's just one way to do it. Wal? Do we rake?"

Al sat back like a man who has launched his ultimatum and wonders. His pale eyes had contrived to hide themselves. And his fingers played with his empty glass.

For a moment he remained without reply. But every eye was in the direction of the dark youth smoking in the depths of his capacious chair. To an onlooker it must have been patent that Al's significant challenge had been looked for.

But the silence broke the instant the clean youth in Nick recovered from that which had inflicted a staggering. Whatever Nick's weakness, recklessness; whatever heredity may have come down to him from his outlaw father, his whole psychology had known a grounding of generous honesty from his earliest moment of waking upon life. He sat bolt upright. And his eyes were aflame.

"That's the low down that belongs where the folk aren't better than hold-ups and race-track crooks," he cried, through his even, tight-shut, white teeth. "That's the foul dirt of a swine!" he went on, his dark cheeks livid with fury. "The Calford Cup's a white game amongst white folks. We'll lose it clean or win it square. You may be an old hand, Fisher. But you don't belong. Can't ever belong if you grow wheat for years. Calford don't stand for race-track scum, or the game it reckons to put up."

There was no thought for consequence. Nick moved not a hair's-breadth. He watched and waited with every nerve ready for anything that might be coming.

For an instant it looked like the storm he had invited. There was an ominous movement of the racing man's hand. But it was a movement which checked instantly as though controlled by something outside himself.

"See here, kid feller—" he began, his pale eyes frigid with fury.

But Nick was at him with the lash of his quarter-breed fury.

"Cut it out, that 'kid feller'!" he flashed. "I'm having none of it from you!"

Al's lip went up in a wolfish snarl. Then the movement broadened into a grin that had no friendliness as Hardy's voice broke in.

"Cut it out, Al, as Woodley says. You asked for it."

The man's hands went up helplessly.

"Wrong agin," he cried. "Oh, Hell, what's the use? Ther' ain't no sense in gettin' hotted. We're jest talkin'. You're guessin' you're sure. An' I'm tellin' you ther' ain't nothin' sure to a race-track with a live one against you. It don't signify anyway." He shrugged and ate another sandwich. "It's your darn meat. We're—jest talkin'."

"And I'm tired listening!"

There was no yielding in it. Nick stood up. It was a movement that was almost cat-like. There was more in it. And the men observing knew it. There was challenge. The challenge of a youth utterly unafraid. And as he stood the fineness of Nick's young body left the shock-headed racing man a mean thing.

Nick spurned the man with a contemptuously turned back. And he spoke to the man who was his host.

"Do we play again?" he asked.

Hardy accepted the challenge. His bland geniality responded instantly.

"Why, sure," he laughed. He pointed to the discomfited Al

Fisher. "You don't have to worry for the dirt Al coughs up. He's that way. He's taken the race-track dust so long he's full to the neck with it. I haven't ever known the time when he wasn't dreaming the way to fix the other feller. There's no cure for it, I guess, unless he grows grain and raises horses instead of mean cayuses. We'll get right back to our chips."

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The deliberateness of it was complete. It was so patent as to be almost crudely blatant. Yet Nick saw none of it.

But Nick, in the game, was blind to everything. His senses were doped with a gambler's lust. He lived only for the turn of the cards, looking for a continuance of that luck which had dealt him a "pat" Royal.

He believed in himself, his luck, his skill. He had a huge margin of winnings with which to plunge. There were hours in which to make Doc Myer disgorge that which Billee's purse had paid for him. The others, too. Especially the racing crook who had dared— So he plunged.

Luck seemed with him again. Cards came. His luck in the draw was sometimes phenomenal. He found himself sitting, hand after hand, with cards that gladdened and urged where no urging was needed. And for upwards of three hours he sat with that worst of all poker luck. The better his hand the more surely, and consistently, a better hand was held against him.

The end was an end which had been carefully planned and ruthlessly operated. There was never a mistake. There was never an incident to arouse suspicion even in a steady loser. And at the break up of the game Nick was left without one single cent of his early winnings, while Hardy's bank was gorged with promissory paper running into thousands of dollars.

Nick's early dream had passed. Its substance had evaporated. Only the vivid ugliness of reality remained to

him as he drove back to Blacktail with Myer and his wife.

There were thousands of dollars of paper to be refunded! Will Hardy was a man who would demand the last cent of it. And he had laid a wager for three thousand dollars on Iron Bolt's winning the Cup!

The crisp air of early dawn had cleared his brain and restored his senses. It had restored too the buoyant optimism which had been momentarily submerged. He laughed at the devastation he had wrought for himself. He smiled as he contemplated the fierce scolding which Billee would pour upon his sleek head. But both laughter and smile passed as he warned himself that nothing now could save him from his creditors and the wrath of his foster-father but that Iron Bolt should win the Cup.

CHAPTER X

Billee's Boomerang

GRANT WILFORD PACKED HIS pipe thoughtfully. He had eaten breakfast in a solitude which had only been disturbed by the comings and goings of a fussing Minty. It had been the sort of breakfast which would, if necessary, serve him until sundown brought him a heavy evening meal. That was his way. The season's work was pressing. Fall ploughing was in full swing. It would go on till the freeze-up defeated the hungry gang ploughs.

Food meant no more to Grant Wilford than just so much stored energy. He was devoid of gastronomic desire beyond the barest needs of his body. He was entirely a creature of his day's labour and its material results. His only recreation was found in the realms of a tenacious memory, and in those responsibilities with which a dead Hester had charged him.

He leant a big body against one of the roof supports of the porch and lit his pipe. The radiance of a perfect Indian Summer morning warmed the beauty of the valley that was his. His narrowed eyes feasted.

He knew Billee to be stirring for all it was the early morning after the night of Calford's Harvest Ball. He could afford her a few extra minutes of waiting before he went down to the barns and saddled his range pony.

It was a lift of dust on the river trail, and it caught his quick eyes. It was rising from a bone dry surface without wind enough to sweep it away. He found sober interest in it. It was even something he had expected. It approached rapidly, leaving a dense trail behind it. And with its advance came the beat of hoofs and the rattle of wheels.

Presently, in the fog of it, he discovered a buckboard and team. It was travelling faster than seemed reasonable.

Finally it drew up, somewhere lost to view amongst the maroon-painted buildings which would presently claim Grant's morning's inspection.

He bestirred at a sound behind him. It was the rapid tapping of heels on the polished floor of the room beyond the open window. He turned at once. And his smile seemed to come with difficulty in reply to Billee's greeting.

"Hello, Daddy, dear! You, too? The morning after the night before?"

Billee's cheer was confined to tone and words. She looked tired. She was pale. And there were the shadows of sleeplessness about her eyes. The father was swift to observe. And he removed his pipe.

"Just waiting around," he demurred, in his word-sparinging.

Billee came to his side and linked an arm through his. She apparently became absorbed in the beauty of the morning. But she understood. And there was no more pretence of smiling.

Grant's pipe went back to his mouth.

"Get a good time, kid?" he asked kindly.

It rumbled gently and the girl reacted. She knew she must. She pressed a slim finger to her smooth forehead.

"Let's see," she frowned. "Two proposals. And home quite early. Couldn't face the risk of a third. Not so bad. Yes. I think so, Daddy."

The man's pipe stem pointed down at the barns.

"Nick's just pulled in. Mathersbee's buckboard. Why?"

There was no drawl. It was quick-fire challenge. Billee drew a sharp little breath. She was not good at subterfuge. Her smile was her surest refuge.

"We left him," she evaded, with a movement of her slim shoulders. "Guess he couldn't have quit till the finish."

"You left him—at the dance?"

"No."

Grant's pipe went back to its place. And strong teeth gripped it.

"Best go and eat, kid," he said. It was drawled and gentle-voiced once more. "You and Nick are making a wind-up gallop."

Billee inclined her head. There was trouble in her eyes as she considered the barns below them. Sounds of activity came up to her. But she gave them no heed.

"Nick, with the Bolt, is going to give me two stone on Jane of the River," she said. "That way we're going to get sure." The arm linked through her father's squeezed. "Don't be hard with him, Daddy—please."

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Nick was still clad as he had been when he set out for Calford the night before. His heavy coat hid evening clothes. A muffler helped to conceal further. His light evening shoes, however, betrayed.

Nick had supreme buoyancy and it served him now. There was no apparent gloom at the disasters of the night. He was a smiling figure framed in the open doorway of Iron Bolt's box.

He was watching the work of the red-headed Seeds, whom he could not, and did not, regard as a servant. He considered the diminutive Robin, who was Iron Bolt's stable-boy. Seeds was bandaging legs that were without blemish, while the boy held the bridled head.

The colt's ears were laid back. Its bared teeth were snapping to reach the stooping man's loosely tucked shirt. Its hoofs were impatiently stamping the thick mass of its clean bedding.

"What time has Billee fixed it, Seeds?" Nick asked, surveying the iron-grey barrel with a horse-lover's approval.

Seeds continued his labours without looking up.

"Noon, I guess," he replied shortly, to the youth whose breed made no appeal to him.

"For God's sake!"

It was smiling. It meant nothing. But Seeds took it up.

"There was frost in the night. Billee's taking no chances," he retorted.

Nick grinned.

"I know," he said, and yawned. He pushed his soft felt hat back from a head which ached sickeningly. "But I wish to God it wasn't to-day. I'm about all in for sleep after last night's darn show. Why the hell couldn't she have you ride him instead of me? A three stone handicap would have made a better wind-up."

The red-head came up from below the horse. And Seeds gazed over the colt's withers. The man's freckled face was without cordiality as he shook his head.

"It would be overweighting," he said. "That way it wouldn't give us the true line we need. Say, don't ride with that quirt of yours. Have Billee's whip. Last time you rode you left him whip-shy. We want that Cup."

Nick smiled at the man's concern.

"Don't get worried," he derided. "He's more precious to me than any jewel till after the race. You don't want that Cup more than I do. Grant been around?"

Seeds came round the iron-grey body with a hand caressing the muzzle which snapped at him. He took the bridle from the boy Robin and turned the colt back to its hay rack. Removing the snaffle from its mouth he secured the halter shank through its block.

"Just about his time," he said, as he replaced the soft dust sheet, and drew the surcingle tight. "He was up on the porch quite awhile back."

Nick was observing the man's care for his charge with an approval upon which the independent Seeds set no value. Had it been Billee his whole attitude would have been different.

"Looks like I'll have to sneak around and make old Minty's kitchens," Nick grumbled.

And he turned to confront the big figure of the man he desired to avoid.

Nick's start at the encounter had nothing happy in it. But he pulled himself together and smiled greeting. It was never less than attractive. And now his smile was as ingenuously disarming as he could make it.

Grant Wilford gave no sign of any displeasure. He considered the sheeted colt and noted the carefully bandaged legs and the adjusted knee-boots.

"Getting a look at him, boy?" he enquired of Nick. "I'll say he's worth it." He turned to Seeds. "You got him in great shape. You'll be through with your worry in a couple of days now."

Seeds' whole manner had undergone transformation. There was a cheerful grin in place of the coolness of a few moments before.

"That's all right, boss," he laughed. "If I never get worse worry than the Bolt's handed me I'm a lucky man. He's right to run for his life."

"Sure." Grant's drawl was more than friendly. "Ought to know things after to-day, too, eh?" He turned again to Nick and his eyes were coolly level. "Best go up an' change out of that party suit," he said.

Nick found himself outside the stable, hardly aware of the manner in which Grant had impelled him. He found himself walking beside the only man on earth he feared. And he failed to appreciate the significance of it. It was not until they were abreast of the wide open doors of a big machine shed that he realized his foster-father had very literally taken possession of him.

Grant Wilford turned into the shed. And somehow Nick was constrained to follow him. The cattleman deposited his big body on the bar from which depended the swingletrees of a team horse binder.

"You've missed the morning, Nick," he began, "so there's not a deal of hurry. You've got till noon—now. Say." His grey eyes narrowed, "You didn't ride back along with Billee and Roddy last night. Why?"

There was only that narrowing of the cattleman's eyes

to tell. But Nick read unerringly. In a flash he warned himself he was for a "show-down." Nothing of the disaster which he had suffered in Will Hardy's apartment was comparable with the portent of Grant's question.

Nick had no smile. He had no resentment. He saw crisis and faced it with the courage which had never failed him since the days when his associates were chiefly the lurking creatures of the hill forests. There were half a dozen ways in which he could reply. And his nimble wits discovered them all. But Nick had honesty. Whatever his shortcomings, whatever the potentiality of the dark blood that flowed in his young veins, the queer anachronism of the grounding of his infant life dominated. It remained true to itself now.

"I sat in at a game in Will Hardy's apartment, sir," he replied, looking squarely into the boring eyes which were perhaps looking for evasion. "We got through around dawn. I made Blacktail with Doc Myer. Then I borrowed Mathersbee's buckboard."

The hallmark of truth was patent. There was another hallmark that was of even greater appeal to the man who discovered it. Grant's eyes lost their searching and his whole manner underwent a passing change. There was a moment when his natural kindness glimmered through gathering storm clouds. Then the clouds closed over it again, and he went on as he had originally intended. But he had witnessed Nick's courage.

"You could have lied, boy, and you didn't," his deep tones rumbled approval. "I could ask you the result of your gamble, an' I guess you'd still hand me truth. But I'm not asking. I don't need you to tell me. I know Doc Myer. And I know why Will Hardy's got himself fixed in his swell apartment. So I needn't set strain on the thing I like good in you. But you got to get it right here and now."

The cattleman avoided the handsome, serious eyes, which, despite everything, were the windows of a fine manhood. He had no desire to hurt more than necessary. But

he was going to hurt, or, at least, to shock. And nothing would divert his purpose. He was thinking of a dead Hester. He was serving her to the best of a devoted understanding.

"You were a bit of a poor, lone, half-dead kid," he went on reflectively, "an' my Hester picked you up in a woman's two arms, and loved you back to the life folks have done their best to make right for you."

There was the wide, deprecating gesture of a man who is only reminding for the purpose of driving home that which he still has to say.

"There's not a deal you need to do in return that's not the sort of stuff a clean boy would feel good about. My Hester figured, and I guess I was willing, that you and Billee should share in even on the stuff we can leave behind us. I've been raised a cattleman. And wings an' halos an' things don't seem to grow around cattle. But there's other things do. A clean, right man's the limit I ask."

The grey eyes came back to the quietly attentive face. They were steely. As hard as the granite which Billee had remembered.

"I'm going to have that in the boy that lives under Hester's roof, and shares in the stuff her two hands worked so hard to collect in a mighty tough life. Just that. No more. But no less. Get that, Nick, boy. Here and now. You'll pull every ounce of your weight in this valley. You'll cut out all school-kid play games till you've earned 'em. You'll live a clean man with a tough job. Or you'll get right out and start up where your father quit you. That's all."

The big body lifted from the bar of the swingle-trees. The gesture was a dismissal that was without anger. But the man's attitude was completely final.

Nick remained unmoving, however. His fine eyes never left the unyielding grim of the other's. He was unafraid.

"Is it, sir?" he asked, in a low tone. "It doesn't seem that way to me. I've heard quite a bunch about the great woman

I came to love like a mother. But I haven't heard a deal of the man who's been a hell of a swell father to me. I'm not getting out, sir."

He turned. He passed out of the machine shed. And there was no granite in the eyes that gazed after the slim, coated figure, whose evening shoes shone ridiculously in the Indian Summer sunlight.

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The noon gallop was over. The last all-important question had been asked. And reply had been forthcoming. So far as it was humanly possible the resources of the iron-grey colt had been ascertained.

It had all been a thrilling success. The success which had been looked for, even expected. And it had set a wave of optimism surging through the ranks of all who served the "Lazy S." Nick responded with the extravagance of one who sees the shadows of looming disaster steadily receding. Seeds' red head seemed somehow to have infected his freckled features, and his keen eyes were popping. Alone of all those concerned in the gallop Billee permitted herself no extravagance. But then—

Riding two stone heavier than Billee, Nick had sent Iron Bolt over the Cup distance to leave Jane of the River a comfortable length away. Even Seeds paid tribute to Nick's handling of the colt as he voted the creature a "smasher."

Billee and Nick had met that morning without reference to the night before. Billee was under no illusion. She knew that reference would be made. She knew that the matter of it would be talked out between them. And so would be the result of Nick's interview with her father. She shrank from both in the belief that disaster was overshadowing her childhood's playmate once more, and that she, herself, must sorely hurt. So they had met in an atmosphere of their customary youthful cheer, which the girl, at least, estimated at its true value. Each had played the part until the all important gallop had taken place.

They had returned together to share in Minty's mid-day meal with cordial appetite. They talked over the gallop. They talked over everything but that with which they were most deeply concerned. And it was not until they found themselves on the porch, and Nick was luxuriously inhaling his second cigarette, that the man's queer courage ruthlessly removed the barrier which had been tacitly set up between them.

The handsome eyes were a-grin as they regarded the girl. There was laughter in the manner of it all. But both were there to mask Nick's real feeling.

"Seek 'em! Pull 'em and tear 'em!" A hand gestured, and Nick's let a thin breath of smoke blend with the words as he lounged in the depths of Grant's rocker. "Get right after it and call me down," he went on. "Tell me I'm a low-down skunk. A feller with no more honour than the sharps I play with. Tell me I'm the world's craziest fool, too. And you'll be right. Say, kid, there's just one opinion in the world that matters to me. And only one person who can hurt me. Shoot it all! Good an' plenty! I deserve it! And—I want it."

Billee was propped on the edge of Grant and Benny's liquor table. And, for a few silent moments, she contemplated the lounging figure aghast.

Nick was her brother in Billee's mind. There had never been a thought in her of any other relationship. She had believed she knew him. She had thought of him as a reckless, happy boy without a glimmer of seriousness and little enough responsibility. Now, as she listened to him, she wondered, and found herself not a little dazed at what she heard.

The man speaking was a passionate creature who realized his failings and was asking for the penalty to which he knew himself to be entitled. The manner of it all meant nothing. Behind the laughter in the fine eyes Billee beheld a real shrinking at the storm he was inviting.

She shook her head in refusal of censure. The eyes which ravished Nick's senses became lost under lowered lids as

Billee avoided the intensity of the regard smiling up at her out of the depths of the rocker.

"Tell me—first," was all she said.

Nick sat quite still. The rocker was held unmoving by firmly planted feet, and legs clad in riding kit. The red-gold of Billee's bare head fired the hot youth in him. Something had got to happen now. Things could not go on as they were. With all that had happened, with a tumult of hopes and fears besetting, the man knew that this lovely child was the whole arbiter of the life lying ahead of him.

"Oh, hell, Billee!" he cried. "Do you need me to tell you?" Nick inhaled deeply and withdrew his gaze. He stared out over the buildings below them, at the warmth of Nature's beauty in the dying season. "I went to play deliberately. I know. My word of honour. I sat in with Doc Myer, Hardy, and others. Guessed it was my last chance to make a big stake so I could buy pools for the Cup. They skinned me clean. That's all. You'll get no figures from me. No. I don't want help. You've given me more than I'd any right to take. I've got two feet. And I'm standing on them. If you'd all the money in the world I wouldn't have it—now. I'm not through though. I'm out to fight to a—finish."

"And my Daddy—this morning?"

Billee, too, was far gazing. But a queer little feeling of desolation hid for her the scene upon which she was gazing. There came a mirthless laugh in reply.

"Showed me the cur I was with a kindness that set me feeling like a crawling earth bug."

It sounded real. It rang with generous feeling. And the newness of it tore at the girl's heart strings.

"And how can you—clean it all up, Nick?"

It came hardly above a whisper. Billee's feelings were deeply involved.

Nick's whole manner underwent transformation. It flung back to all his irresponsibile buoyancy. He laughed. He sat up, tilting the rocker in his eagerness.

"Do you need to ask that, Billee? After this morning?" he cried. "I've laid every bet I could make, including one of three thousand. Three more days, kid. Then I'll be cleaned up. I'll be through with everything folks count detrimental. After Saturday I'm all for riding a dead straight course like—you can approve."

There was a moment of dead silence broken only by the sounds coming up from the farm buildings below. It was a moment when the woman in Billee realized. It had been there in the man's last three words. It had been in the manner in which he had gazed at her. She gripped the edge of the table upon which she was sitting. And a queer little trouble looked back at him.

Nick met the look. The sight of it faded the enthusiasm out of his eyes. And when his eyes were not alight with animation there was something bleak in their blackness.

Billee had to reply.

"Oh, Nick," she cried, "why take such a chance? Think of what it would mean to you if—if Iron Bolt failed us. I mean, horses aren't—aren't steam engines. They're as full of moods as—as—"

"Women," Nick said sharply. "But why the sudden doubt?"

"It's not sudden doubt," Billee retorted. "It's just sense."

Nick sucked his cigarette and shook his head.

"It isn't—after this morning."

Billee made a little gesture. At all costs she felt she must keep Nick to the subject of the risk he was taking, after what she had seen.

"It's like all the rest of it. I mean, setting out to get money on the turn of a card. But I suppose I'll never make you understand."

"Understand what?"

"The folly of plunging further when the water's up to your neck," Billee smiled pathetically.

"Rot!" It snapped impatiently. "The boy who turns down opportunity deserves to go under. I tell you our colt

can't lose. Roddy can produce all his Coppermines. And I don't care a curse."

Nick lit another cigarette. He stamped out the discarded stump with a vicious foot.

Billee thought swiftly. She made up her mind. Nick would have to be told. That which she had seen in him decided her. It would be best now. Before—before—

"Roddy, and Benny, and Live Oak are just as sure as we are," she warned. "Roddy's so sure that—"

She broke off with a smile.

"That what?"

Billee shook her head. Her gaze remained averted.

"It doesn't matter to you, of course. But Roddy asked me to marry him last night," she said.

Nick bestirred. He stood up from the rocker and left it swaying violently. He moved to a roof post and leant against it.

"Well?" he questioned, his gaze on the forest slopes of the western hills.

"He was so sure of winning with Coppermine we made a bet of it," Billee replied.

"Bet of what? How? You're talking riddles."

There was a tone in it that stirred resentment. Billee flushed. But even so she now felt that her bet with Roddy was something in the nature of a boomerang.

"I told him 'No'" she said coldly. "We were bitter rivals till after the race. If I was engaged to marry him folks would never believe the race was run straight. You see, the whole country-side's betting. So—so we made a bet of it, too. If Coppermine beats us on Saturday I shall marry Roddy."

"You bet—that way?"

Nick had turned incredulously. His black eyes were accusing.

Billee gasped. The foulness of the implication enraged her.

"Nick! Don't dare!" she cried hotly. "Iron Bolt will win

the Cup if anything on earth can make him! I'm no crook!"

"But—you want to marry him?"

"Oh!" The vicious persistence of it maddened the girl. Her cheeks were aflame. "And if I do it's no concern of yours," she cried.

Then as swiftly as it had arisen her anger passed. She gestured appealingly.

"Oh, Nick," she went on, moving from her table and approaching him, "don't let's quarrel. You don't get all I'm driving at. I'm thinking of you. Your risk. I only wanted to show you what Roddy thinks about the race and his Coppermine. He's so sure of winning that he took my bet on the instant. Are we any wiser or cleverer than Roddy? Don't you see? And you're betting your whole future on our colt. Roddy is convinced of winning. And if he does—"

"You'll marry him!"

It came harshly. And the dark eyes that flashed round at the girl had become transformed. Nick's whole personality seemed to have changed with them. He stood there an almost threatening figure.

"Yes. I certainly shall."

Billee shrugged coldly and moved back to her table. Nick turned again to his post and leant at it. For some moments neither spoke. Nick continued to smoke, inhaling in gulps. Then he flung his cigarette from him and moved off.

"Roddy won't win," he snarled across his shoulder.

CHAPTER XI

Live Oak Investigates

THERE WAS A HEAVY REEK OF stable-litter. Masses of it, long straw bedding, were spread in the open for sweetening. Encircling the enclosure, which was no more than hard beaten earth, were the many horse boxes. They had none of the refinement and luxury to be found in the Blacktail Valley. But they were efficient. They were frank adaptations which had been wrought years ago in Benny Hyles' cattle days, and had been left unchanged. The stud farm of Valley Deep was Live Oak's sole charge, and Live Oak disliked change. So it remained an expression of his crude organization.

Live Oak was saddling up. His working garments had been reinforced by broadcloth. He was wearing a black jacket whose width of shoulder suggested inheritance from the square-built Benny. For the rest he was the cleanly washed Live Oak of every day.

He flung a quick glance round from his saddling. His white-ringed eyeballs made a complete circuit of the wide depressions in which they were set. They came to rest in a gloomy regard of the diminutive Stringer idly looking on.

"You need to register them facts like they was your Bible study, Ropes," he said. "Better, mabbe," as an after-thought. "It ain't come along yet. But we're goin' to get it. I'm looking for the sort of stuff we'll know the way to handle right. And when we've handled it you're going to get the sort of chance I don't guess a miserable life like yours ever see before. No," he added, regarding the man meditatively, "I'd say not. Couldn't have by the looks of you. Likker! You'll be staked to buy gallons of it. And that's another darn fact you need to get your powerful

intellec' fixed on. You can hog it all you need, after we've pulled that Cup. Souse? Hell! I'd say. Some."

He glowed benignly. And Stringer grinned.

"Sure," came ready agreement and approval.

Stringer was not beautiful. He was neither tidy nor clean. But his eyes were clear. He was alert with keen intelligence. He was smallish. And his rough garments helped to display muscles like drawn steel wire.

Live Oak tightened the forward cinch of his saddle. He drew up the back cinch to a gentle pressure on a lean paunch. Then he continued to speak over his shoulder.

"Boy Roddy's staking us good. All we need for them pools. You're in fifty-fifty."

"Stakes or—winnings?"

It came shrewdly. Live Oak ceased work, turned, spat.

"Hell!" he ejaculated disgustedly. "Use your powerful intellec'. I said you was in fifty-fifty."

"Sure."

Stringer ate tobacco with renewed satisfaction.

"You'll stop around," Live Oak went on. "You'll keep tab. And you won't hit no hay-patch neither while I'm making Blacktail."

He flung his reins on his horse's neck. And he rested a hand on the horn of his saddle.

"It's them hills, boy," he went on. "You don't have to look at nothin' else. It's comin' that ways."

He stood for a moment regarding the sweep of unbroken spruce forest which climbed from adjoining his barns to the very summit of the northern hills. Then he gestured expressively.

"Sure. Just them darn hills. If you get smoke, or a taste of it in that nose of yours you'll jump for it. You'll hit it right into them barns. And you'll cut loose every blame sorrel that's tied up there. You'll run 'em south. Just like hell was on their tails. But it's Coppermine first. Coppermine! Who means that—likker. It's that or a funeral,

when I get along back, you'll likely find—personal. Get me?"

"Sure."

Live Oak looked cold approval.

"That's what I fancy to you, Ropes," he went on amiably. "Kind of short on langwidge. But a hell of a kick of intellec' back of your fool head. Mabbe folks wouldn't reckon you'd the punch of a buck louse seeing your mean shape. But I do allow if God A'mighty reckoned to play mean dirt on the human junk crawlin' round His darn hills you're the right boy He'd set to put it over."

Stringer grinned as he bit a fresh chew.

"Will He be setting in on this play?" he enquired slyly.

Live Oak registered less approval.

"Can't rightly say," he replied frigidly. Then with a vicious snarl. "But I am!"

"Sure."

Stringer was soothing. His humour had died abruptly.

He watched Live Oak vault his saddle with the agility of half his years. And stern reproof was flung down at him.

"Quit your comic, boy," Live Oak ordered harshly. "Guess it don't suit a powerful intellec' like yours. Get your eyes to them hills. And, if things go amiss to that likker hoggin' you're figgering, we'll choke the reason out of some lousy neck with rawhide. We're standing for—Hell!" he exploded. "Here's that darn old Benny looking like he's a Holy Catechism yearnin'."

The impish gleam in Benny's eyes was full of humour as he looked up at his old-time confederate. Stringer had contrived an undetected departure. The two were alone. And Benny's detaining hand was resting on the horse's drooping neck.

"Who's the dame, Live Oak?" he enquired. "Or is it the mortician?"

Live Oak resigned himself. Benny was never less than a somewhat besmirched deity in Live Oak's secret regard.

"Not so good, Benny," he retorted acidly. "Come again. 'Less they spell's their names 'Cy Mathersbee.'"

"It was the hambone effect," Benny chuckled, indicating the broadcloth.

But the cattleman was far-gazing.

"That's just the way of things, Benny," he observed patiently. "You can't put it over Cy, and them sharps round Blacktail, with a lousy vest flappin', and a chaw dripping juice from a face that needs launderin'. I figger to get back of Cy's intellect."

Benny's eyes widened.

"In Hell you are! What's he keep there?"

"Mostly junk, I guess. But you can't rightly say till I make Blacktail," Live Oak hinted coldly.

Benny's hand dropped from the drooping neck.

"And how long's it going to take?" he grinned.

"Sundown, I guess." Live Oak turned again to the hills. "Ain't chancin'," he went on. "But I got to get wise. There's a play breakin', and I need to know. You see, it ain't good guessin' all the time, Benny. It's—uneasy. They're telling there ain't a sharp from these hills to Calford that ain't slammin' his roll for the Blacktail colt. A week back there wasn't one of them sharps but was shouting Coppermine home. Wal? They're telling the world Coppermine's a plumb dead hoss. And I can't think a bigger crook than Cy Mathersbee to tell me why."

"And the bait to—hook him," Benny enquired slyly. "A bunch of likker?"

Live Oak shrugged cold scorn.

"Mabbe a coupla so," he snapped.

For another brief moment the distant hills held his restless eyes. Then of a sudden his violent spirit loosed.

"Here! Say, boss," he cried, returning to formality. "I don't need to tell you. You and me got the sort of dirt in us that don't belong to our swell boy Roddy. Guess we was raised in muck and we'll likely die in it. But we're right after the sort of play that ain't come amiss to us

since ever I can mind right. There's a bunch means to sink our hoss. Mabbe we know 'em. Mabbe we don't. It don't signify. But when I buy a couple likkers from Cy I'll pull good value for my cents. You don't have to ask fool questions. And you don't have to talk likker like I hadn't more sense than you. Just clamp your face shut. And sit around. I'm promising you that swell hangin'-bee with us two settin' in."

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Live Oak was firm in his belief that every saloonkeeper was just plain "crook." It was probably that his monthly return to work was never accompanied by anything better than a dim memory of his pay-roll. But just now things were different. Cy Mathersbee looked like the only honest man outside Kentucky.

So Live Oak rode into Blacktail with no better than three frayed and dirty dollar bills, content in the certain knowledge, even counting on returned hospitality, that nothing under five dollars could produce the least impression on his complete sobriety.

Cy's hotel was frame built and badly in need of paint. It overlooked that which, once a year, was a vivid green market place surrounded by every comic production in the way of habitation of which a prairie settlement alone can be proud. Upstairs it had sleeping accommodation to suit the undiscriminating. It had a dining-room with flies and a red-haired waitress. It had barnage largely turned over to automobiles that made many and frequent noises. But its chief attraction was a long, polished, red-pine bar complete with brass footrail and cuspids.

Live Oak found Cy wiping many glasses and generally cleaning up the worst of the litter which is the inevitable wake of a human gathering in such places. The life of Blacktail had liquored and ate. Now it was enjoying its usual after midday dinner coma. Live Oak and the saloon-

keeper had the long bar to themselves. They probably had two hours ahead of them without interruption.

Tact had been displayed. Live Oak had given full expression to the gestures common to thirsty custom. He had also invited Cy. He had passed time of day with a burly greying creature whose small, narrowly set black eyes bored watchfully. With the first drink they had discussed a harvest in which neither found the slightest interest. With a second their scope had widened to a war which rumour said was being fought in Europe. But their third brought them to that which both deemed worthy of their closest consideration. Curiously enough Cy found himself broaching the important subject.

"I'm sort of glad you horned in, Live Oak," he began, with the closest possible attention to the wiping of a glass already polished to a gleaming frenzy. "Couldn't have hit a more sootable time with our town bums doped with their noon eats. I been looking to get a word about them two hosses from our valleys."

He sucked some decaying teeth meditatively.

"Seems like there's a mighty queer play going around someways. And I ain't got the rights of it—yet. Say, what's amiss with that sorrel colt of yours?"

There was a restfulness in Live Oak's eyes due to the potency of raw rye. They considered levelly across the bar. That which they discovered seemed to satisfy. He told himself Cy wanted to know. Cy knew a whole lot himself. If Cy were told that which he wanted to hear he would make a generous exchange. The best assurance Live Oak obtained of Cy's goodwill was that a brown bottle was insinuated towards him in invitation.

Live Oak needed no verbal bidding.

"Wal," he replied, as the amber liquid mounted in his glass. "I can't see a deal amiss with the colt myself."

He considered his glass. He raked his head with fingers unusually clean. The gesture canted his flap-brimmed hat at a rakish angle.

"Coppermine's a kind of machine," he went on expansively. "Well oiled, and acts that way. The more you oil him the harder and faster he slams his darn hoofs down on to the track. He's that oiled now I'd hate to be the track his hoofs hammer on Saturday."

He shook a solemn head.

"No, boy," he added. "There ain't nothing amiss with Coppermine, except he'll pull that Cup. You can bank your roll on that. And you can sleep just as sound as the bums of this burg are doing right now."

"That so now?"

Live Oak recognized the tone. His steady eyes watched. Cy laid aside his glass cloth the better to fold his fleshy arms on the edge of his bar. He observed the air of close attention.

"'Bout that track you'd hate to be on Saturday?" Cy asked after profound consideration. "That colt *will* be hammering it?"

"The sun gets up a Saturday same like other days."

"Ye-ah. That's so." It drawled doubtfully. "But the folks can't stop the darn sun gettin' up."

Cy's whisker was being stroked thoughtfully.

"An' they can't stop my colt—neither!"

Cy liked the grim of it. But his doubt still remained.

"Can't they though?" he observed pleasantly. Then: "Find that likker good? Got another horn. We got plenty time."

Live Oak drained his glass. The bottle came to his hand.

"That's good hearin', Live Oak," Cy went on shrewdly. "Specially to a boy with fi' thousand to draw if your colt likes it. It's a sweet bet, as it stands. Then I know the straight deal you put over—personal. But if the sharps around our burg are wise I guess I'm bug. That's all. Ther's some of 'em yearnin' to sell up their wimmin so they'll get stuff to hit up the Blacktail hoss. They're guessing yours is right fer your private buryin' patch."

Live Oak shook a sombre head and drank to the house.

"You just can't ever tell the way folks 'll act foolish, Cy," he mourned pleasantly. "Get a newsheet to tell 'em eat hay, an' they'll bray like hell till you hand 'em a sweet-grass hash for their Sunday eat. Ther's some fool ram started the flock. They'll all chase right through the gap in the top-rail fence. I've a year's mean wage says Copper-mine. Fancy it?"

Cy's whisker parted at his mouth.

"Bully for you!" he cried, and examined the contents of the bottle. He held it to the light, set it aside, and uncorked a fresh one.

"Eleven year old," he commented, and pushed it across the bar. "Crackerjack stuff. Set a whisker on a right chest. They ran that Jane filly off the hoof with Wilford's kid gal up on her," he went on thoughtfully, while Live Oak strained his pocketbook's resources. "That all-fired quarterbreed handed her a bunch of weight on the Bolt hoss. Put it over, too. How does it signify? Jane pulled it easy last year. She's a better mare this. Like it?"

Live Oak blinked sober confidence.

"Jane's a swell dame all right," he admitted. "But she don't belong the Bolt's class. Guess it was no sort of bunch she cleaned up last year. Goin' to join that flock an' chase through under that top-rail. I'm surely yearnin'."

Live Oak's four fingers were set widely parted about his glass as he poured. The measure of his liquor, too, reflected his abstraction as he urged the man behind the bar. Cy refused the challenge of it.

"No, feller," he declared. "I'm standin' pat. I don't like the Doc's ways. He's makin' one hell of a speil."

Both drank with the sincerity of perfect good will and mutual regard. As Live Oak thoughtfully replaced his glass on the bar he made a contemptuous sound with his tongue.

"Him?" he questioned. "Guess he's quite a bunch of ways. What's he talking?"

The parting of Cy's whisker revealed an array of decay.

"It don't do to notice the Doc talkin'. Specially talkin' Nick Woodley. Doc mostly talks the way it suits his pocket book. But when he talks to Nick Woodley you can't just guess how. Y'see, Live Oak, years back that feller used up weeks gettin' that quarterbreed to stay alive. But since the kid's grown to a man it looks like he feels mean for those weeks when he could have been setting in right here. Says that Bolt hoss has just got to pull that Cup. Says Nick Woodley's finished in Blacktail and Calford if it don't. Says he's through with Grant Wilford and his kid gal, too. Says Nick knows it same as if it was set out in writing. An' he says the boy's sleeve is sure packed with right aces. I guessed around for them aces," he added thoughtfully, "and I can't rightly locate better than one." He shook his head. "Doc's set a bank of money on the Blacktail colt."

"Has he now?"

Live Oak carefully drained his glass. He shrugged the lean shoulders under his broadcloth.

"The Doc's got a powerful nose for easy money, too," he reflected. "Must be that Breed's got him mesmerized."

"Can't think that, someway, Live Oak," Cy pondered. "I've sat in with the Doc years," he went on gloomily. "He's the sort dollars go to like they like him. It's queer, too. They pass right in to his bank roll an' don't never seem to make a clear getaway from it. That's why I'm mighty glad you got that darn machine o' yours well oiled."

Live Oak nodded amiably as he stood up from his leaning. He sorted out his flaming scarf and jerked the loose shoulders of his outsize jacket into place. He re-adjusted his hat to a less conspicuous angle. It was all to emphasize departure against Cy's mute invitation.

"It's powerful pleasant in you, Cy, but I ain't having it," he said, with reluctant decision. "It's been a real intellectool meant' though, an' I'm glad for it. But like you said just now, you don't have to notice when Doc talks that Breed kid. But with a boy like Doc I allow that ain't so

easy. So when Saturday gets around, an' you ain't feelin' so good about that elegant bet of yours just send me word along. You can even up all you need with me on the Black-tail colt. You surely can. So long."

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Live Oak was more than satisfied. His whole being was lit up with it. Nor had that lighting to do with the liquor he had consumed. Cy Mathersbee had told him all he knew. And very much more than his words had conveyed. But that was generally what happened when the cattleman set out to learn things.

Live Oak had no pretensions to any unusual skill in the study of his fellows. But he possessed the uncanny instinct which belongs chiefly to the more deplorable side of life. It was that instinct which is usually to be discovered on the wrong side of the law. Circumstances had forced upon him a rich understanding of the viewpoint of the malefactor. It was that which had served him so well in an hour of alcoholic intercourse with Cy Mathersbee. He had received confirmation of a fixed belief. A confirmation which came through the story of Doc Myer's betting.

His journey home was rapid, but by no means direct. It was more than significant that he scrupulously avoided contact with the homestead of the Lazy S. Furthermore his detour carried him to the northern heights of his home valley.

Once at the summit, where altitude denied the spruce forest sweep any further life, he reined his horse and surveyed the wild world about him with eyes of keen comprehension. He studied the sky. The clouds. He turned his thin face to the wind as though scenting that which it might carry. He even considered the far crystal peaks under the light of a westerling sun. He missed nothing whatever that interested. And only he moved on again when he was confident that that was so.

His way lay along the sharply cut line of the forest limits. Nor did he pause till he encountered a stationary horseman sheltering under woodland cover. He was sheltered from any chance observation, as well as from the slash of a keen northwest wind streaming down off the far ice. There were moments of talk between them. There was report. And the giving of orders. It was all sparing. Then Live Oak continued on his way.

Live Oak had three outposts along the forest break. He visited each. And when, at last, he turned his tireless horse into the deeps of the woods, and made his way back to his charges below, he was not only the satisfied man who had left Cy Mathersbee. He was also coldly confident.

CHAPTER XII

Anxieties

THE OLD PARLOUR AT BENNY'S ranchhouse was almost unchanged from the days when a baby Rodney had found hands and knees of better service than the two feet upon which he stood to survey the great grain farm which had replaced a sweet grass cattle range.

Odd bits of furniture had been replaced, and their successors had grown old in hard service. Sarah Hyles had made many suites of hangings in her time. And rugs had worn threadbare under the careless tramp of heavy feet. But through all the years the spacious apartment had remained an unpretentious living-room. It still had its great woodstove; its big table which served for work and some of the meals which had to be eaten. It still contained rocker chairs, and the many intimate details which told of two men and a woman who found repose of body and mind within its restful shelter.

The sun was deeply westering. Its softly mellow glow was streaming in through windows not yet closed to the chill of the evening mountain air. The great woodstove was radiating welcome heat. And Sarah Hyles with her knitting, and Benny with a long black cigar thrusting aggressively from the corner of a close-shut mouth, should have known all that peace at the close of a splendidly productive year which belongs to those who live by the land.

Sarah's handsome personality was rigidly erect in a chair which was made for lounging. Her knitting needles were busy. They were almost feverishly so. Her blue eyes were hidden as she kept them fixed on the thick, grey woollen man's sock which was developing under her hands.

Benny had just one attitude in a rocker chair. It was

an abandoned sprawl with his stout breeched and booted limbs outhrust. Whatever his mood it was usually the same. His hot eyes were gazing hard. And, since no one was observing, they were expressive of an unease he would have denied hotly.

Benny's gaze was levelled at the top of an old bureau, where were propped up a number of envelopes containing mail which had been brought in from Blacktail during the afternoon. It was unopened mail. And it was addressed to Rodney, who had not yet come in from his work on the fall ploughing. It had been set up to show a large, official-looking envelope in its forefront. Benny was staring at that envelope as though held by the spell of a Medusa's head.

Sarah had looked at it. But being a woman she no longer continued to harass her feelings. Therein lay the difference. Benny knew the meaning of that mail. And he glared at it, savaging himself with the feelings it inspired. Sarah knew its meaning. But she went on with her knitting with profound concentration.

Benny jerked his cigar to the opposite corner of his mouth. He drew his legs up and set the rocker swaying.

"Looks like you must have been crazy, with those two darn kids, Ma," he grinned suddenly, in an effort to distract his thoughts from the hated mail.

Sarah's smiling eyes lifted from her work. She shook her handsome head.

"No, Benny," she demurred. "Just sleepy."

"But you'd oughter know better. 'Tain't as if you were a kid, too. We didn't have to make a bet of it. You'd fixed to marry me an' that's just all there was to it."

"But then look at the 'catch' you were, Benny," Sarah smiled slyly.

Benny's humour failed him.

"An' ain't our Roddy one hell of a catch for any gal? Don't care a curse if she was queen of the world's biggest chain stores. Sets me kind of sick. Making a bet of it on the way hoss flesh acts on a race-track!"

Benny blew a cloud of smoke with a gasp of exasperation. And his dark eyes gloomed again at the mail on the bureau.

"You're not feeling good, Benny," Sarah chided. "Those two kiddies won't worry for that bet. It was just the play of it. Billee wants our Roddy like you wanted me."

But her smile passed as the mail on the bureau thrust itself within her chance view.

Benny smoked for some silent moments. And the hush of the big room seemed in some way to oppress them both. There was the sound of the draught under the door of the woodstove. There was the whine of a rising wind which ruffled the yielding foliage of the woods behind the house. There was the click of Sarah's steel needles. That silence could not be allowed to continue.

Benny literally forced himself to turn from the staring mail. He looked across at the grey head bent over the sock, which, one day, he would wear. He saw that a beautifully rounded figure was just a little hunched out of its customary uprightness. He saw that the blue eyes, that had always meant so much to him, were steadily regarding the stitches Sarah could well have made blindfold. His restless mood of irritation subsided.

"I guess that's so, Ma," he agreed, with a gentleness so unusual that Sarah smiled over at him. "And I guess if Gran's gal makes our Roddy the sort of wife you been to me there won't be no darn kick comin' to anybody."

"Maybe she'll make a better, Benny." Sarah's eyes were softly regarding. "Billee's got it all. All her mother. And the best of that great big feller, Grant. But she's got more besides. She's the brain to help make our two farms the biggest proposition west of Winnipeg. I'm not scared the sort of wife she'll make."

"No, Ma," Benny drew a deep breath while he flicked his cigar ash regardless of the rug on which it fell. "I don't guess there's a thing we need to be scared for in it."

"No, Benny. Not a thing."

The grey head shook with unnecessary vigour. For some moments Benny continued to gloom. Then he returned the mangled end of his cigar to his mouth, and spoke with exaggerated unconcern.

"Guess that brief 'll be from Ottawa," he said pointing the mail. "Seems like it by the office marking."

Sarah did not look up.

"Yes. I guess so. Looks like it's 'official.' "

"Roddy boy's been looking for it."

"Crazy to get it, I'd say."

"Fine. I'm real glad it's come along for him."

"So am I. Ever so glad."

Benny smoked on. The needles clicked to the end of a grey row. The setting sun caught both figures in its levelled beam and threw them up in sharp relief.

Benny removed his cigar and tore off its mangled end with savage teeth. Then came a harsh laugh that startled.

"You know what that says, Ma?" he asked, pointing his cigar at the bureau with its ominous burden. "That says our boy's to get the guts blown right out of him 'way over there in France. Where you an' me can't be along with him. Our boy. Yours and mine."

Agony leapt to the blue eyes which stared across at the square figure sprawled in its rocker. For a moment they gazed in voiceless panic. Then Sarah seemed to recover control of them.

"Sure, Benny," she said. "I know. Our boy. But he wants to go. I—I think I'm glad for him. I mean they'll let him."

Benny's rocker tilted with a jolt.

"Glad? Course you're glad. Never said you weren't glad. We both are. Yes, sir! Roddy's all a feller. Guess they can't scare him off with any darn high explosive Scotch alcohol stuff. 'Tain't a circumstance with—Roddy."

"He's got swell grit, Benny."

"Sure he has. Wouldn't be yours, Ma, if he hadn't."

"Yours, Benny."

"An' yours, Ma."

Benny stabbed his cigar back into his mouth and rocked to and fro. He was frowning fiercely. His dark eyes had lost their impishness. They were just brooding. Sarah's needles clicked on. Her hands were without a tremor. But somehow her shapely body seemed to have shrunk further into her chair.

"When do you guess it'll be, Benny?"

The tone denied the steady hands. Benny's shoulders jerked.

"Right away, I guess," he said, with elaborate unconcern. Then his harshly mirthless laugh broke again. "Politicians don't waste a deal of time when they figger to get the guts blown out of half the world. Makes you wonder, Ma. They'll set around wise and keep their own darn carcasses whole, an' tell folks to go get 'emselves shot to death for their country's good. Gee!"

"But Roddy doesn't think that way, Benny."

"Sure he don't. He's a swell feller."

Sarah turned to the glow of sunlight pouring in through the open French window. She was gazing abstractedly. There was a drooping to her firm lips. And lines furrowed her usually smooth brow.

"Roddy guesses we owe a lot to that little old country over there," she said. "Says she's just mother to us here. Same as I'm his mother. Says I wouldn't have him throw me down when I needed him."

"Tcha!"

Benny leapt to his feet. He flung his half burnt cigar at the stove with a violent gesture. He strode over to the side of his grey-headed woman. One hand caressed a bowed shoulder affectionately.

"That's all right, Ma," he consoled awkwardly. "If they blow the guts right out of him I guess they'll tear the hearts out of us two. But I wouldn't call him son if he stopped around."

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Benny was lighting a fresh cigar when the shadow fell, and the cheerful voice shattered the gloomy silence. Rodney's big frame filled the open window, and came in from the porch.

"We cleaned up for that winter wheat, Benny," he said. "Turned in the last acre. We're harrowing to-morrow. A full three-quarter section. Gee! There's nothing like tractors when you're on the jump to put it over. I'm turning 'em on to break that new two hundred or so. Start that up to-morrow, too. It can sweeten good all winter. And we'll seed it a patch of oats in the spring. What about it? Do you agree, sir?"

It was full of a happy deference as well as keen decision. It was an expression of a great friendship. Benny blew smoke and agreed.

"Sure, boy. You reckon you'll get two hundred out of that patch below Live Oak's track?"

"More. You see, it narrows down where the river cuts through, and widens again beyond the hills. I'd say, with a year's clearing that scrub on the river bank, we can break another five hundred acres. It's rich stuff, too. Rich and sheltered. It's kind of like the deeps of a gorge there where there'll be no chance of August frosts. This territory along the river's full of possibilities wherever you look."

Rodney moved across the room to the bureau, where he saw his mail standing up in its packet waiting for him. Two pairs of eyes watched him. The blue eyes were frankly troubled. The dark eyes betrayed nothing.

Benny replied. And his words were a defence for which he was thankful.

"Ma always reckoned we were missing the best land we'd got when we didn't clear beyond those hills. I—"

But he broke off as Rodney looked up from the official letter he had hastily opened and scanned.

There was a shadow of disappointment on Rodney's plain face. His mother's perception was instant. And hope surged.

"What is it, Roddy?" she cried eagerly. "Have—have they turned you down?"

The hard-case Benny was no less affected. But it found him silent, and only watchful.

Rodney glanced quickly from one parent to the other. If he understood he gave no sign. His brows drew, and his eyes dropped again to the letter which was unusually long for an official communication. He read it through carefully.

Sarah's needles were stilled. Benny's cigar extinguished for want of vigorous draught. When Rodney looked up at last it was the eyes of his troubled mother he sought.

He smiled. And there was no lack of beauty in his plain face for the woman's devouring gaze.

"No, dear," he said. "But I guess it's a case of half a loaf. And the bread looks like darn poor quality. Here, folks," he went on, "listen. It's Wishart, our Calford member. I guessed he was the liveliest and best wire I could pull. You see, he's known us years."

Benny sighed a relief no words of his were permitted to express. Sarah's needles had nothing automatic in their purposeful movements.

Rodney read.

Dear Rodney,

I'm writing in a hurry. I've done all the lobbying that looked good to me. And I think the result is the best possible for what you want. I've made exhaustive inquiries. And even consulted privately with L.H. The whole thing is in the melting pot as yet. And much depends on the progress of things over there. The opinion is that the war is going to be nothing short of prolonged tragedy. Very prolonged. It looks like, ultimately, we here are all going to be heavily involved. In fact, one half of the world fighting for its life against the other half. Already a large all-Canadian force is being contemplated. But it still remains in the air and will remain so until we get word from over there. Meanwhile, however, we are out to do our utmost unofficially so to speak. We are affording every facility for the passage of volunteers who will go over and join the reserves of British regiments. If you like you can be one of those volunteers. But there's no chance of any commission right away. But L.H. is sympathetic. And I've got this out of him quite definitely. The men who volunteer now, and go over and get experience, will be first turn

for commissions should the time come when Canada sends her own expeditionary force. Let me know if this suits you. If it does all you have to do is to report here at Ottawa to me by the 31st of this month. I'll see the whole thing through for you. And I'll have you meet L.H. himself. Give my kindest remembrances to Benny, and my best love to your dear mother.

Yours ever,
Al Wishart.

P.S. This is quite unofficial. And you will please keep it confidential outside your own home.

A.W.

Rodney looked up from his reading. He gazed smilingly at his mother and then turned to the scowling Benny.

"That looks like being just that, folks," he said, and again glanced down at his letter.

He had seen. He had read those different expressions as though they were the pages of an open book. He shook his head as his mother's urgent question broke from her.

"Well?" she asked.

There was a little clearing of her throat as though it had become dry.

"I shall report the way Al says."

"Hell!" It exploded out of Benny's chair. "But you ought to be an officer right away. You're used to runnin' a darn big show."

Benny was thinking of risks. Someway, very erroneously, he was possessed of the idea that an officer's job was less risky. Rodney denied him without mercy.

"Sorry, sir," he demurred. "I need that experience. You can't put a soldier's job over right, any more than any other, till you've learned it. So that's fixed. I'll make Ottawa October 31. The Cup is Saturday. The 20th. That leaves me with ten days before—"

He broke off thoughtfully and laid aside his ominous letter. He left the rest unopened and stepped over to the mother whose eyes were smiling bravely. He bent down and kissed the troubled forehead.

"Bless you, Ma," he said gently. "I'll get right along back to you."

"I'm—I'm glad for you, Roddy," Sarah faltered. "You're surely acting right."

Rodney stood up with a jolt. He turned to Benny and held out one big hand. In a moment a flash of humour grinned into Benny's sombre face.

"Thanks, sir," he said, as his father gripped firmly. "I'm feeling good you'll be glad to handle a plough again. You won't have to worry for any of it. Live Oak 'll be crazy glad to put you wise."

The clouds lifted. Benny's eyes lit. And the imp took possession of them at the sound of his son's chuckle.

"You darn young scallywag!" he cried. "You go get your lean guts blown full of Scotch alcohol! You can go plumb to hell with that plough stuff!"

Their hands fell apart.

"Sure, sir," Rodney smiled warmly. "Glad to—if you'll share in with me."

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Benny was on the porch. Rodney was in the house dealing with the rest of his mail. Sarah was still knitting, deeply absorbed with the anxieties of a mother.

Rodney was disturbed to the point of violence. That was his way. He was enraged against a condition of things which involved his son being claimed by the slaughter-yard of a Europe thousands of miles beyond his own personal ken. He wanted something upon which to vent his feelings. And while his passions silently raved an absurd pride refused denial.

Roddy! Roddy with a girl waiting to marry him! A girl he was equally crazy to marry! Roddy the master of thousands of acres of wheat, and with fortune pouring in on him in an avalanche! He was throwing it all down while he must go and give a tiny bit of help to a darn country that hadn't more claim on him than that the land he farmed was part of its dominion. Crazy! Plumb crazy! But

the sort of thing he, Benny, would have done himself at Roddy's age. Well, there it was. But he wanted to hit someone. He wanted to hurt. And as he sought a victim his gaze turned upon the forest sweep up to the crests of the northern hills.

Benny rolled his cigar savagely across his lips. He clamped it tight in a fresh position. Then his searching gaze was caught and held by movement where the forest came down to the range of horse boxes. It was a horseman emerging from the woods.

Benny's mood instantly relaxed. The imp in his dark eyes was born again. He had been looking for a victim on which to expend his volcanic rage. There was one ready to his hand. Live Oak returning from Blacktail. Probably liquored. If he was—

Benny moved off the porch. His square figure literally hurtled down the slope towards the barns. And the activity of it had a surprisingly soothing influence upon his impulsive temper. He found himself chuckling humour at the thought of all he would tell a "soused" Live Oak about his family tree.

They encountered each other in the last flaming glory of a setting sun in the wide enclosure from which all the sweetened bedding had been removed back into the surrounding barns. Live Oak reined up at sight of the aggressively advancing figure of his friend and chief. His deeply sunken eyes considered that approach. He considered it in the light of his keen understanding. And when Benny arrived he was off-saddling his horse with a consideration of the work of it which suggested an importance far greater than any presence of a disturbed Benny.

Live Oak did not turn from his off-saddling as Benny planted himself behind his lean shoulder.

"That hangin'-bee?" Benny demanded, without preamble. "Wal?"

Live Oak dropped his cinchas loose. He yanked saddle

and blanket clear of the horse's back by the upstanding horn supporting the coil of rawhide without which he never moved.

"You're goin' to get it, Benny, just as sure as the sunset's makin' a better picture of you on the dung of this yard than I see in that homely face of yours as you come along. What's amiss?"

Benny's generous humour instantly responded. He grinned at the back of Live Oak as the man shouldered his saddle and bore it into the barn. Live Oak came back at once to remove his horse's bit. He faced Benny, considering.

"Wal?" he demanded. And Benny had no longer desire to concern himself with the cattleman's family tree.

"Roddy's going right over to that darn war sump," he cried. "Yearning to get the guts blown right out of him."

Live Oak spat.

"Guess I ain't ever been a father far as I know about," he said coolly. "But I'd be glad to have been that kid's."

Benny's smile was good to see.

"Guess you can't share in," he said. Then. "That hangin'-bee?"

"When do the folks make in to Calford for the Cup?" Live Oak countered, removing his horse's snaffle, and clouting the beast's rump to start it off in through the open door of its barn. "There's three more days. An' then Saturday."

"Day after to-morrow. Roddy's taking his mother in. They're making in with Billee and the others from the Blacktail. I'm stopping around till you run Coppermine in. Why?"

Live Oak wiped the snaffle with the bunch of straw he picked up from the ground.

"That seems good," he nodded. "I want your dame clear away, Benny. Roddy, too. He ain't got the sort of dirt us have. 'Tain't much of a lay-out the old ranch-house anyway," he added thoughtfully. "An' these darn barns sure

need makin' over. I guess it'll be worth it to get that hangin'."

"Is it Cy's likker talking?" Benny's question snapped.
Live Oak shook a mournful head.

"Jest plain sense."

"Get out from under, then."

"Sure. We'll be fired to a cinder before Coppermine makes Calford."

"That the best from—Cy Mathersbee?"

"Jest the hoss sense of it."

"I see. Tell me."

They remained talking for many minutes. And at the finish of it the sun had gone, and the valley twilight was rapidly deepening with the shadows of night. Benny departed thoughtfully. He returned up the incline to the old house upon which Live Oak had passed his sentence. Live Oak vanished into the barns.

But Benny got no farther than the old porch. Inside the house he knew he would find a pathetically troubled mother, and a son whose intentions he applauded and hated in no uncertain fashion. Outside, down there at the barns which were his last link with the cattle days he loved, he had listened to a tale of disaster which had found him completely convinced. He wanted no more of either the one or the other just now. So he lit a fresh cigar and leant against a roof post. He stood there and gazed. Just gazed into the deepening shadows of night thinking of many things.

It was as a huge yellow moon lifted above the summits of the valley slopes that Benny finally got the better of his feelings and returned to the strong confidence with which he was accustomed to face the life that was his.

The moon's soft yellow sheen lit the barn enclosure. It shone down lighting the closed doors of the boxes upon its northern side. He saw one of the doors open. There was no sound. It just opened as though of its own volition.

There were a long few moments without further happening. Then came a vision that returned a grin to the rancher's features.

It was a horse closely sheeted and saddled with a familiar horned saddle. The beast was hooded, too. And the sound of its dainty hoofs came up to him. There was the figure of a man leading it. A familiar figure.

The door was closed and locked. The man swung himself into the agitated creature's saddle. Then horse and rider moved off across the enclosure and vanished into the night.

Benny threw his cigar from him. He looked at the glory of the full moon. Then he left his post and passed down to the barns again.

CHAPTER XIII

Fathers

BENNY GESTURED AN EXPRES-

sive hand.

"I don't know, Gran, and that's a fact," he deplored, with a sigh. "The old countries over there get one tired thinking. Seems like they've lived too long, or something. Same like it is with folks. Maybe they grow whiskers, too. Guess their eyes are rheumy, and their ears flap when they need to listen. Shucks!"

He settled himself back in his chair seeking comfort for his broad shoulders. The evening with his friend was just starting. A tenacious left hand was in contact with a replenished glass, and he was fingering it tenderly.

"Crazy gover'ment!" he went on, as Grant spared himself reply. "That's the way I see it. You can't pack new laws, one atop of another for thousands of years, without getting your folks into one hell of a mix up. It's no sort of use talking. You just can't get the human sap chasing his tail around the sidewalk like a blame kid's whip-top, side-stepping the cop's club all the time, without getting the sort of comeback like they're putting over in Europe right now. Stands to reason. There ain't a deal of room in a boy's roof when he's done guessing if his belly's filled, right. And it sure needs a darn depository to store all the legislation junk the political bosses can pile up in a thousand years. Looks like they've set that poor blame Europe dizzy."

"Yeah."

It drawled amusedly as Grant breathed a gust of smoke and sought liquor support.

Benny warmed to his subject.

"War?" he asked. "Sure. Wouldn't you want to get out and hit, if those talking boobs made it so you couldn't knife your gravy the way you fancied? Sure you would. Me, too. I guess we'd have to kill something or get crazy. I'd like to guess there was no sort of trouble around a mighty elegant world until some poor darn fish scratched out a bunch of foolishness and called 'em laws. Looks to me there was more laws in Europe two thousand years back than would shake up a universe. And they ain't stopped production since. It licks me the juice those wise guys need to waste telling the folk 'don't.' No, sir. The way I see it that war's just the natural come back to break up a Constitution so their legislators can make it over."

Grant removed his pipe. He was considering the moonlit distance where the waters of the Blacktail reflected the splendour of the night. Benny was seething with hot feeling. And Grant liked listening when Benny was like that.

"I guess your country gets advantage that way, Benny," he said provocatively.

Benny devoured the bait.

"Why, sure!" he agreed cordially. "My country? I'd like to say right here my country's about God's own when it comes to making a boy's life easy."

He devoured his liquor with appetite and went on.

"But I allow, too, it's kind of diff'rent someways," he admitted magnanimously. "You see, we only been making law stuff for a couple centuries or so. You can't saturate things in that time. Congress don't have a hose that'll stand the pressure. No. Our bosses ain't worried as yet. But then we've a right Constitution. You want to get that. Our slogan don't stand for monkeying. Get a look at it, Gran," he urged. "There it is. Set right up in New York's Harbour where you can see it fine when the fog clears. Freedom! Liberty!"

He gestured comprehensively.

"That's us," he enthused. "Get dollars. It don't matter

how. Spend dollars. We ain't asking. When your dame's through with her make over, and you don't fancy it, or she can't stand for the colour of an egg with you across the breakfast board, what the hell? There's plenty others. And that guy's laff on you. If you don't reckon it appropriate you have to tell him that way with a couple guns or other such weapons you most favour. It's the right put over. You don't have to feel bad, either. The chair's easy. Us folks are right after the minute! Finger ready to drop the hammer—on sight! Liberty! No, sir. We ain't gotten need for any sort of foreign wars."

Grant heaved his smiling bulk.

"Sure," he rumbled. "When you making back there, Benny?" he asked blandly.

Benny flashed a swift glance. It recalled his departed humour. He grinned.

"Maybe when we're through with that lake of smooth likker you got packed in your Hester's cellars."

It was a mere flash, though. And his mood slipped again as Grant helped himself and passed one of the three brown bottles across the table.

"But it's queer, Gran, too," Benny considered as his glass filled. "Roddy's standing pat with a bunch of saps going right over there. He's got it all. You'd guess he knows. I asked him, tell me? What sort of darn bone is it they're wrostling? What's it about, anyway?"

Grant nodded.

"Easy. Huns. Sure."

Benny weighed up the water pitcher and negatived.

"I'd say there's nothing damp to Roddy's intellect. Ma fixed that. He's bright. Licks the average a mile. Sort of up-take to set fork-lightning hating. He hunched them big shoulders of his like I'd asked something foolish. Told me: 'Search me, Benny! You don't have to worry. It looks like one swell big scrap. And I'm yearning.' Christ! I wanted to holler!"

Grant beamed meditatively.

"A right boy takes holding when his country's honour's straddled the ante," he nodded.

"Ye-es."

The drawl of it left a thoughtful silence. And the frog chorus down at the river deepened it.

Benny followed his doubt with an irrelevant question.

"Young Nick around?" he asked.

Grant's beam departed.

"Him and Billee's nursing our Iron Bolt like the Crack of Doom was on a Saturday. Taken a hunch to himself since the harvest party."

Benny meditated sombrely.

"'Tain't the same, though. He's got colour."

"Yeah."

"Queer the diff'rence."

"Sure."

"Sure."

Benny drained his glass and clattered it on the table.

"Hell!" he exploded. "Crack of Doom! Say, Gran, I want to see Saturday yesterday. A week back! More! Those two kids of ours we been figgering for years. Can you beat it, Gran? Crazy for themselves. And got to make a fool kid's bet of it. Our colt licks yours and Roddy gets her. If it don't—"

"He'll get her just the same."

Benny flapped his hands at the night.

"But you don't get me, Gran," he complained querulously. "That bet's a fool kid's play the way I said. But Ottawa on the 31st October ain't. Think, feller! Those folk you call Huns. You can hear tell. They're making that darn Paris, or whatever it is, like an avalanche. Him! Roddy! Going right over there and guesses help stop 'em. They cornered the world's arsenal of guns. And they'll be shooting the blame lot right where that fool boy 'll be standing around. Gee! Billee rhyming his epitaph!" He flung up his hands.

Benny wiped moisture from a fever-hot brow.

"What's it all mean?" he snarled, the impulse beyond his control. "This! Roddy's a he-feller. Billee's a she-gal all the time. They won't see a thing amiss in a living corpse, who's got to get his guts scattered with Scotch alcohol explosive, makin' a fool gal a widow before she's had time to be a wife. You want to get it, Gran. Billee, with eyes to shame a summer sky, and the sort of gold in her hair they pack in a bank's vault so folks won't get dazzled, going around rhyming Roddy's epitaph, and looking like she was no better than a mortician's mute. It's a hell of a muss."

Benny dashed at the liquor bottle, poured, and gulped. His feelings were at breaking point.

Grant bestirred. Grant understood. Benny had one thought. One thought only. Roddy! Benny's big hope and adoration. He was going to play a right man's part. And the hardcase cattleman's heart was breaking.

He watched the square body fling itself back in its chair and sit staring out into the night.

Benny was Grant's life's friend. A hot-head Kentuckian with devils mixed up with the angels in him. Generous, impulsive, and with a heart as big as a house and the temper of a turbulent volcano. Grant felt he must help.

"One day, Benny, you'll get so you talk with your head," he drawled.

Then he heaved himself for the sort of vocal effort foreign to him. He removed his pipe as a further preliminary, and turned eyes alight with a great kindness and sympathy. He shook his head.

"If Billee was my son I'd be crazy glad for her to fancy getting right over to kill Huns," he rumbled. "That's so. If what they're saying's right maybe they're going to need women-folk to put things over. And if they do, and Billee gets the notion, I'll outfit her all she needs, and ship her along quick. And I'll be glad to. Billee's a gal. And it's not easy dumping a female where there's the sort of stuff a

war's made of lying around. Roddy's a better man than you and me, Benny. He don't sit around getting wise with the likker under his belt like us. Roddy's the boy we fixed years back who's to put over the life's work we've only begun. And to see Billee gets the life that rightly belongs her. That being so, Roddy's nigh as much to me as he is to you and your Sarah. I'm glad that boy's going. And is ready to get the med'cine coming him. I'm hoping, Benny! But if he gets it I'll just say, 'Amen.' And I won't snivel like a fool Kentuckian. Get me, old son? You want to stand right on your hind legs and tell God A'mighty He's hell on miracles making it so. He's produced a he-kid like *our* Roddy out of a bargain-basement carcase like yours. You need to get it we're just two fathers who gotta sit around."

The pipe went back into a tight mouth. Two huge legs spread out from under the rocker. And the peace of the night remained undisturbed as Benny reached a hand over the table and chuckled.

"Hell!" he cried. "We best prise the neck of another bottle."

CHAPTER XIV

Dilemma

IT WAS WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON.

Two clear days remained before Saturday's race. Iron Bolt was trained to the moment. The whole of the Blacktail establishment, from Grant Wilford to its smallest wage earner, was a thrill with that confidence which finds expression in eager gambling. The colt had had its final gallop. And everything was in train for its dispatch into Calford on the morrow. To-morrow evening, too, the whole combined race party from Blacktail and Valley Deep would foregather in the city for the festival. They would drive with Rodney, a happy gathering of warm friends in the keenest rivalry.

Billee should have been on her toes with excitement and happiness. Her confidence was no less than that of the others. She had worked so hard in her colt's preparation. Then for weeks she had simply lived for the moment when the gate went up and she felt the pulsing life leap under her. But somehow the savour of the whole thing escaped her. And as she stood on the porch pondering, her sense of humour was in open revolt.

It was jeering at her. It was telling her she was not the least bit clever. It was reminding her in fact that her mentality had the deplorable calibre of a damp squib. There were a lot of disquieting puzzles awaiting solution. And she could find no really satisfactory answer to more than half of them.

The riddles revolved about young Nick. Whenever Billee discovered anything to disquiet her it was usually some doing of young Nick. But this was all different from anything that had gone before. From the moment she had

told him of her perfectly childish bet with Rodney he had changed from laughing, happy irresponsibility to a sort of nightmare figure which had become nothing less than incomprehensible.

Billee was still breeched and booted, as for her morning's work with her colt, despite the fact that the mid-day dinner was long since over. Her disquiet had robbed her of all thought of changing. She knew that something had got to be done. Some sort of decisive action on her part had become imperative. But what?

There were certain matters which the girl understood, or perhaps accounted for. Twenty-four hours earlier Nick had left her in no sort of doubt that the old relationship of brother and sister between them was defunct. That henceforth they were just girl and boy with all the implications of the new position. But for the life of her she could discover no justification for Nick's angry slamming of the door of companionship in her unfortunate face, and sulking behind the bolts and bars of it. That roused her supreme indignation. It provoked her to contemptuous anger.

It found her sufficiently exasperated, too, that all contact with her girlhood's playmate had become one of mono-syllabic rudeness. But, even so, in her fond generosity she did her best to find excuse. She had not the smallest desire for Nick as a lover. But after all if he chose to resent Rodney it no doubt accounted for the manner in which he chose to treat her. But that for which she could find no excuse was the attitude Nick had taken up with regard to the innocent colt upon which she knew him to be relying for the funding of his latest debts.

Throughout Iron Bolt's preparation Nick had closely associated himself with it. He had watched, lynx-eyed, every step of its progress. His help, too, had been untiring and invaluable. But for twenty-four hours the colt's name had not passed his lips, he had not been near the animal, nor had he shown the least interest in the race, or anything to do with it.

Billee's interpretation of this deliberate attitude was inevitable. Nick was implying that she would not ride to win on Saturday. That she was "on the crook" as he had already hinted. That she meant to sacrifice not only him but every soul who had laid a bet on the Blacktail horse that she might lose her bet to Rodney and marry him.

It was wicked, fantastic, intolerable. It was so beastly that the girl hardly dared think about it. But in view of other matters it had at least the redeeming feature that it had no mystery in it.

The mystification had started that day in the course of the noon meal, at which, unusually, her father had been present. Nick's latest activity complex had by no means interfered with appetite. He had come in from the far fallows with his face like a thunder cloud. He had sulked through the meal with hearty appetite. And, at its close, he had come to sufficiently to beg the afternoon off from her father that he might run in to Blacktail.

He had claimed urgency. He was required in Blacktail to deal with pressing personal affairs which had just cropped up. He had very definitely hinted at a letter. Otherwise he had offered no explanation. And her father, in view of Nick's spurt of hard work on the fallows, had only been too ready to acquiesce without requiring any.

There would have been no mystification for Billee in the matter except for the hint of that letter. In her position of deliberate ostracism she had listened without comment. But her's was the duty of sorting, and distributing the household mail, which was brought out from Blacktail. And she was confident Nick had received none since the day before the Calford ball. Nor was it in the least likely that he had received any written message out on the fallows.

The second mystification had been in Nick's curious doings after the meal. There had been no hurrying off to Blacktail. He had just sat around on the porch smoking cigarette after cigarette in the nervous manner of a mind disturbed. He had remained aloof and brooding. But his

eyes had lost their bleak expression of indifference, and had developed a lambent smoulder which Billee had characterized as "devilish." He had remained waiting on her father's departure for the fallows. Billee had been sure of that. She saw him take up his position watching after her father's going. Nor did he move from it until the big figure of the cattleman rode out from the barns below. He watched it vanish down the river trail. Then he bestirred.

Billee had seen him hurry down to the barns. From an upper window she had seen him ride off on his skewbald "pacer." And he had followed the river trail, too, which was eastward in the direction of Blacktail. He had been bustling his horse as though in a hurry.

The third mystery had revealed itself within an hour of Nick's going. And, in its way, it had proved itself a climax that shocked.

After Nick's going Billee had found herself still unaccountably interested, not to say troubled. She had intended to change to an afternoon frock. But instead she had left her bedroom and returned to the porch. There she had remained for an idle hour reviewing the disturbing elements which Nick had provided. And making up her mind to the "show-down" she intended to have with him.

She warned herself that the position between them could not be allowed to develop further along its present lines. Nick was her old playmate and good comrade. Billee was really devoted to him. Even his present poisonous attitude could not lessen the bond between them. She was determined to bring him to his silly senses. And she even found herself amused at the storm she would probably, at first, provoke.

Her smile was directed at the far stretch of blue grass which the ploughs had still left untouched, away across the valley, which the woods on the southern slopes came down to meet. She was so pre-occupied with her thoughts that she saw none of it. And it was only when movement forced itself upon her consciousness that she became aware.

Movement just within that far woodland fringe. A horseman. Riding fast. Passing along under the shadows of the trees as though avoiding observation. It was Nick!

Billee knew she was making no mistake. Her sight was keen. She was accustomed to distance. The skewbald's colour and gait were quite clear to her. Then Nick's seat in the saddle was quite unmistakable to one of her experience. He had not gone to Blacktail after all. There he was heading for the western hills, the gorge of the Blacktail river, which was the highway he always took when setting out on one of his shooting trips.

He had secretly doubled on his tracks. And the manner of it was stealing. The paltriness of its subterfuge at first disgusted. It angered Billee that Nick had dared to cheat her father. Then came another feeling. She asked herself —why?

Billee's generosity and excuse were exhausted. Nick had become impossible. What did it mean? Something was amiss! Something was afoot! And suddenly she thought of Roddy. Was Nick going over to Valley Deep to see Roddy? And if so was it about—?

The girl smiled again. Perhaps. But something had certainly got to be done about it. And she would do that something. She would ride over and see Roddy, too. She was not going to let the two men come together with Nick in his present mood unless she was there to witness it. She hurried off to saddle her broncho. She, too, would ride over to Valley Deep.

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Billee was destined to get no farther than the north-western heights of Benny's valley. It was there where the woods came up from behind the old ranch-house and the stud barns. They were the hills of Live Oak's nightmare.

The girl had reined her broncho that she might gaze. It was a view that never failed in its appeal. One of her little regrets was that her Blacktail home could show her no

view comparable in its natural loveliness. Cradled between titanic hills Uncle Benny's homestead was alight with the warm hues of the year's fall. It was a wood-clad world through which a precious mountain torrent meandered amongst endless fallows until the far southern hills swallowed it up.

But she discovered that which instantly diverted her attention. It was little more than a moving speck. But Billee knew at once. Rodney, on one of his beautiful sorrels, was just starting out to ascend the old track which he had contracted to have graded into a trail suitable for automobile traffic.

Billee drew back. She was confident he could not have seen her. So she reined her broncho to the shelter of a bald sentry rock to await his coming. The thought of surprising him gave her something of a child's delight.

Then what she had seen told her something which gratified her. She had seen nothing of Nick. And Nick was not with Rodney. She hoped and believed the men had not met.

After awhile the plod of hoofs labouring up the almost precipitous ascent reached her in her hiding. She smiled. They grew louder. Then the beat of them told her the sorrel had broken into a lope. She moved out from her shelter to face the wintry blast.

Rodney reined up. He was frankly startled. And Billee had her little reward.

"Why! Say!" Rodney cried, and grinned. "This is just great, Billee. We were slack. And I guessed to— But what's—?"

Rodney left both sentences uncompleted. And Billee laughed at him.

"What perfect lucidity," she cried. "My! And I was figuring to lean on your monumental intellect, Roddy. Let's clarify. Have you seen Nick along? I've a whole bunch of worries and things I intend to dump on your mighty shoulders. So I came along over. I guess it's my

one chance of keeping my tiny spark of reason from blowing out."

Rodney's grin remained. But his eyes were searching.

"Fine!" he nodded, as his horse ranged up to the broncho's side. "With the Cup fixed so that our side win it on Saturday I've been looking for something to worry about. But Nick? Do we go back down? Or over along to your Blacktail."

Billee considered the man's great body. Then she nodded up at his plain face which she frankly loved.

"Blacktail, I guess," she decided. "No interruptions. You can get tea with me—alone."

There was no actual smile in Rodney's reply.

"I'm a whale on tea—alone with you, Billee," he assured, "Let's move. My sorrel's not used to wind ~~on~~ the ice."

Billee discovered a great feeling of comfort and peace. Whatever Nick was doing, or intended, she had her Roddy to herself. It meant a lot. She sighed her satisfaction. Rodney radiated strength, moral as well as physical.

They moved off the way she had come. And the girl's broncho seemed in no way disturbed that its hardy body had become a shelter against the bitter wind for the aristocratic sorrel. The gale whined bleakly over the barren summits.

Billee was reluctant to begin the story of her worries. So, instead, she indulged the horse-lover in her.

"Wonderful stock your Copper Jade's, Roddy," she approved enthusiastically. "Look at those ribs. Those quarters. The breadth. The 'let down.' And the lovely conceit of the beast. Those dainty hoofs. The way he puts them down. My! Roddy! Your Benny was smart siring with the Kentucky Kid. Ours is fine British blood. But the Kid was the pick of the whole United States." She watched the colt fighting its snaffle. "Much too splendid to be clawing around these barren hill-tops under a great, horned Cali-

fornian saddle, with a rusty ring snaffle to bite on, and with an ice gale blowing. Why?"

Rodney found himself caressing a lifted, beautifully arching crest.

"Thought I'd make it clear," he smiled slyly. "Quicker, of course. News. But those worries? And Nick?"

Billee flashed anxious enquiry.

"Good or bad?" she asked.

"Middling."

Rodney gazed out westwards where the alabaster of the far summits shone in the westering sunlight. Then:

"What's young Nick got up to now?"

The persistence of it pleased Billee.

"Must have got it wrong. Intellect seems clear. Lucid. You haven't seen him, then? This afternoon?"

"No. It had to be Nick, or your comic cayuse. The world's shouting Iron Bolt home. So Nick. Tell me."

Billee discovered unforeseen difficulty. She remembered the subject of her talk with Nick. Her bet with Roddy. She must skate over it somehow.

There was a level stretch ahead. Farther on there was a sharp descent through a broad forest ride. She lifted her reins. As the broncho broke into a lope the sorrel fought his bit afresh. She became aware of Rodney's skilful hands.

"What a pity they made you so big, Roddy," she laughed. "We could have run it out together on Saturday. Still, I'm thankful for the mercy of it. I shall get away with that rat, Abie, all right."

Rodney nodded.

"And about Nick?"

Billee gestured helplessly. But she laughed happily. Rodney was still the same. The old tattered doll who would persist in falling down when she set him up. And he was still quite as plain, too.

"Up to his fool neck in fresh gambling debts. The sharps. Doc Myer. Will Hardy. Some others. Got Hail Columbia! from my exasperated Daddy. Won't look my way because

of my bet with you. I'm dirt for him to tread on. Worse, I think. Nearly told me I was a crook like he's used to losing his money to. Implied I wanted to lose to you on Saturday. So mad at things he took to work all yesterday afternoon and this morning. But this afternoon begged off to run in to Blacktail on business. But he hasn't made Blacktail. Hared off to the hills as if he was scared someone would see him. They did. I did."

Rodney listened intently to the terse outline of Nick's doings. Billee's manner robbed her story of none of its significance. Rodney's eyes narrowed till their blue was almost hidden.

"But he's due in Calford with us to-morrow evening," he said sharply.

"I know," Billee nodded. "Part of my worry."

They had approached the descent. Billee reined up her broncho. The sturdy creature was quite ready to lope down the side of a mountain. But Billee had regard for the legs of Rodney's sorrel. The lovely thing was carrying nearly two hundred pounds. She turned in an eager little appeal.

"Things are amiss, Roddy," she cried. "I can't think. So it's up to you. That's why I came—mostly."

"You told him our bet. Why?"

Billee had tried to skate it. The big creature had pinned her down. She wanted to wring her hands.

"Must I?" she asked, with pathetic humour.

Rodney's brows went up under his flap-brimmed hat.

"Sure. Looks like it's the key. Nick's been crazy for you, years. As crazy as I am. We've been watching each other since way back in college days."

Billee stared round.

"And you never gave me an inkling?"

"Why, no. But tell me—why?"

They were moving down the forest lane. And the shadows gloomed about them. Billee started to laugh.

"I think you're as bad as some horrible mediæval inquisitor," she declared with humour. "You'd strip a poor

weak girl's soul bare to the bone. I think I hate your plain face. I had to show Nick his folly in staking everything on a horse. That's what I meant to do. Told him you were so sure you'd made a bet to marry me on Coppermine's winning. All it did was to make him tell me I was on the crook. Would sacrifice him, and everybody, so I could lose to you and marry you. He implied that! There it is. You can do as you please about it."

"Great!"

Rodney reached out an arm. Billee found herself encircled by a vast mass of muscle. She found her face against his, with their horses helping to support the perilous span of a bridge. Rodney's kisses left her well-nigh breathless as she released herself and straightened up in the saddle to greater security.

"That's unfair," she protested happily. "You haven't won yet. It's not even Saturday."

"But I'm going to," Rodney grinned.

"Nick says you won't."

Rodney's grin had passed. He was gazing out straight ahead. And something of the forest shadows seemed to find reflection in the manner of it. Billee was observing from the tail of an eye. She saw the big shoulders lift to indicate decision.

"Listen Billee," he said. "You've built a stack of worries because you're sore. Nick's hurt you pretty badly. And you've a right to feel that way. But you haven't to worry. You see, little kid, you want to get back of a boy's mind when he's crazy mad for a girl like you. Maybe I can because of the way I feel. If I were in Nick's shoes I'd need to get out and break something. Maybe I wouldn't just act the way he has. But you've got to reckon Nick's not just white. See it? If I had to lose you I wouldn't tell you you're on the crook. I wouldn't act like a sulking school kid. I might feel that way. But I'd try and sit in closer. But Nick's got Indian in him. And you can't judge him the

same. You can't just tell. That's the way I see it. And maybe I'm sorry for him—in a way."

Billee felt if the big creature went any farther along those lines she would either burst into tears or have to hug him for a generosity she could not share. But Rodney went no further. Instead, all the tolerance went out of his manner abruptly.

"Maybe that leaves the garments still on your weak girl's soul," he went on slyly. "Now tell me that other. And don't miss any of it. I mean that haring to the hills stuff."

Billee decided that there was no alternative. She only wanted to hug her "Roddy, boy." She could tell him now without any skating. And she forthwith did so in careful detail.

And Rodney listened without an interruption. He just sat his restless sorrel, steadying the eager creature and far-gazing. Billee only hesitated as she came to the end of her brief narrative where she had discovered the tri-coloured skewbald speeding secretly through the forest fringe towards the western hills.

"You see, Roddy, dear, I got a bad shock someway. I—I couldn't understand. It looked all senseless, fooling my Daddy that way, till I thought of you. Oh, yes. I'd guessed. I think I knew why Nick was mad at me. And I thought maybe he'd made the excuse so he could get over to you to—"

"Shoot me up, or something."

Rodney shook his head.

"No, Billee," he went on, after a thoughtful pause. "He hasn't been around. And I don't guess he even thought of it. It's not easy guessing, of course. But there is an explanation. And I think we best accept it. I'd say Nick did get word from Blacktail. And the sort of word that put a scare up on him. I know Will Hardy. And Doc Myer's a pretty bit of work when there's dollars in it. Maybe they twisted a screw on him. And he's looking to his precious hills to

make him a gopher hole till after Iron Bolt's made it so he can face them. Of course, Saturday's not going to help him. But he thinks it will. And, being a fool boy, he's grabbed the only chance he saw. We'll keep his going close between us, eh? We mustn't do a thing to hurt him."

Billee looked into the eyes which were the only good looks Rodney boasted. She smiled gratefully as she shook her head.

"I think I like the ruthless inquisitor best," she said quietly. "There's still my biggest worry."

Rodney inclined his head.

"I know," he said easily. "But that doesn't need to keep you thinking. That's for me. And I'm glad to shoulder it for you once and for all. You see, I see Nick as your fool brother. Not as your lover. If I had to look at him that way I wouldn't do a thing but beat him further under. You've got my word that every cent he owes those sharps, or anyone else, will be paid. Any hole he's blundered into I'll pass him a friendly hand to haul him out. There's no fool play he can make but what I'll see him through. I've got nothing on Nick because you're going to marry me right after Saturday. I shall fix things that way when we make Calford to-morrow evening. You can forget Nick told you I wouldn't win my bet. I understand that. He's got hell inside him about now. You just need to stand for those moods. That's your penalty for making us fall for you. You've got to remember a boy can't be always looking into wonder violet eyes without getting pretty crazy drunk. He'll get over it. And if he don't I can't help him that way."

Billee reached a hand which contacted with huge muscle.

"Roddy, you're a great big—dear. You've always been a dear to me, even when you were a kid doll on our porch." She paused and her slim brown hand squeezed the forearm it was caressing. "That hill trip's not right the way you put it though," she went on. "But it's no use. We can't guess further. Tell me your—news."

Billee saw the relief. There was scarcely an attempt to

hide it. The man's sigh almost made her smile. He grinned.

"Ottawa. October 31. Crossing to England. Reserve battalion. Just plain 'Tommy,' they call it. Best Wishart could do. Commission later. Perhaps."

"Oh, Roddy! So—so soon?"

"Two weeks to-day, kid," Roddy beamed. "We'll get a week of being married. Bit short on the honeymoon. Maybe we'll make it up—after."

Billee's eyes lit with a pathetic flash of almost tearful humour.

"I'm whooping glad for you, Roddy. You see, you want to go. It's just fine being a man, and wanting to go when you aren't obliged to go. But you haven't beaten Iron Bolt yet. So we mayn't even get that week's honeymoon, may we? You see, dear, I'm no crook, though Nick thinks I am. Iron Bolt 'll go the limit. I'll ride him to his last stride. But I think I'm glad your Coppermine's a Kentucky Kid offspring."

Rodney eased his hand. The sorrel started to go. The broncho ploughed along beside its more reckless companion.

"That's all right, Billee, dear," he laughed. "The folk 'll get all that's coming them out of your cayuse. But I'll see Grant and fix things. Then for that swell tea with you —alone."

CHAPTER XV

Live Oak Laughs

RODNEY PAUSED TO WATCH

Stringer's preparations. It was the old-time spring wagon being got ready for the journey over to Blacktail that afternoon. The small, unclean creature was performing with surprising forethought. But then Rodney knew the man was preparing for his mother's comfort. And Sarah had a place in the hearts of all who worked on Valley Deep which the hardcase Benny and even himself could never look to occupy.

The man had littered the wagon bottom with a warming depth of new straw. He had laid over it a large fur rug which was there to wrap snugly about a woman's lightly shod feet. He had dusted meticulously the hard worn cushions of the wagon's seats. And, at the back, where Sarah would sit, was spread a thick bearskin, with a beautiful grey wolf robe to wrap about her.

It was all Stringer's own idea. And Rodney warmed to the kindness of it. He felt it to be the sort of service for which wages could not pay.

A "hand" came leading the team of bronchos which were to be hooked to the wagon. And Rodney passed from the open shed on his way to Live Oak's stables. He crossed the litter yard to the open doorway of Coppermine's stable.

Live Oak was just within looking on while Abie completed the colt's evening toilet. Abie was adjusting the monogrammed sheet, which was Sarah Hyles' little conceit. Coppermine's coat was shining. Caught in the slant of the afternoon sunlight it was like burnished red gold.

Live Oak gave Rodney no heed as he entered the colt's

box. His restless eyes were alight with sombre watchfulness. He was there at the horse's heels chewing with a sort of savage energy.

Rodney understood. Where Coppermine was concerned nothing satisfied but personal supervision. Live Oak trusted to no given orders where his presence was possible. He trusted no one. Rodney was not sure he trusted even his own supervision. Live Oak had a pertinacity that was quite invincible.

Abie tightened the surcingle and buckled its strap. He linked up the cords beneath the colt's belly. Then he secured the tapes of the hood under the crested neck. After that he reached a handful of hay from the rack and buried his dusky face in it. He inhaled its aroma. It was blue-grass hay of the sweetest quality.

"Fixed?"

The question rapped harshly in the silence.

Abie lifted his squat nose from the hay which he dropped into the colt's litter. His cunning eyes surveyed his charge appraisingly.

"I guess," he spared. And he reached a caressing hand under the horse's belly. The beast lifted its quarters. And its front hoof beat a tattoo on the depth of bedding.

"Then beat it!"

The manner of it was without grace. It was without even approval. Live Oak was a despot.

Abie hurried from the box. Live Oak watched him pass out. Then he went up to the colt's head. At once he became transformed. The great horse towered above him. But Live Oak reached up. And in a moment the head came down while the man's claw like hands stroked and fondled the velvet softness of the small, aristocratic ears.

Rodney noted the gentleness of it. Then he smiled.

"That boy thinks a whole lot of the colt, but not too much of you, Live Oak," he said, with a twinkle of friendly amusement.

Live Oak's slim shoulders went up in cool unconcern.

"Can't worry with the sort of thing you mostly find lousin' itself back of the bars of a circus cage," he observed scornfully.

"That's so. Nor trust it, either," Rodney retorted sharply.

The cattleman seemed wholly absorbed in the beautiful creature that was nuzzling the fringe of his leather chaps.

"That Dago's dead 'crook,'" Live Oak admitted easily. "I allow he'd rob a snivellin' babe of its loin rag. But set his leg over the back of this colt, an' he can't help but ride. I guess ther' ain't dollars enough in the world to stop him."

Rodney smiled.

"Splendid faith," he derided.

Live Oak's eyes rolled.

"Ain't ever learned to spell it."

Rodney shook his head.

"It's no use, old friend," he said quietly. "His eye doesn't please me. And I hate the sight of his ape's countenance."

"Which ain't going to start no argument, Roddy, boy." Live Oak leant against the manger. "You can sleep easy though. Same as I will when the key's turned on the colt in Calford, with young Ropes sittin' around inside to see he don't throw a nightmare." The man's eye steadied. "I got him bought. Ropes is in fifty-fifty."

Rodney gestured.

"What a mind to live with!"

"You don't have to. Guess I got it young. An' it'll likely see me through."

Live Oak released the twitching ears, and Coppermine reached up to the sweet-grass rack. The cattleman smoothed a hand down one foreleg. In a moment it was lifted. It was a movement of friendliness. An expression of the sweetest temper.

"I had to come along for a last peek before making in to Calford," Rodney said, smiling at the demonstration of understanding between the tough cattleman and his charge. "You see," he grinned, "I had to get sure your

scare hadn't materialized. I'll take your word for it and sleep sound."

Live Oak spat.

"Sure," he agreed. "But one time I guess that quick head of yours 'll wake an' ask itself why the hell the world's buying Iron Bolt. A good enough cayuse. But God A'mighty built this one right here. An' His name don't figger in any stock register around Blacktail."

"Looks like fitting you and Ropes, anyway. Where's the catch?"

The cattleman released the slim, clean fore-leg and came back down the loose box.

"Just what you ken notice," he said. "He'll be runnin' atop of a bone dry track come Saturday. An' he likes it good with them legs and hoofs of his. The Bolt's got the soft British hoof."

The shrewdness of it appealed. Rodney considered the busy movement of the lean jaws. He wondered at all that had been left untold. He drew a deep breath. He found something very reassuring in Live Oak's unyielding attitude.

"Well, he's got to pull me one big stake," Rodney smiled. "So I certainly do hope he likes it."

Live Oak's reaction was definite. If Rodney was standing in for more than a miserable Cup it made all the difference. Some of his gloom seemed to fade.

"That's real good hearing, Roddy, boy," he said, with a dash of enthusiasm. "An' you can't make it too big, neither. You can pull a hundred thousand out of the Iron Bolt guys if they got it. How much was you saying?"

"A wife."

Live Oak gave the impression of a douche of ice water. His disappointment was a sort of crash. He stared at the mischief he saw grinning in the blue of Rodney's eyes.

"Ask the poor darn colt something, Roddy, boy," he complained, in his disgust. "You don't need no Copper-mine to hand you one o' them thugs. You need to get it the

dame that figgers you belong to her ain't passin' the bet when a colt can't pull the distance. No, sir. I'd say you're jest missin' a right chanct. Make it dollars. A roll of 'em. Ther's more to 'em."

In an access of emotion Live Oak ejected a mangled chew to besmirch the immaculateness of Coppermine's bedding. And Rodney's gust of laughter, as he reached a big hand and took possession of a lean shoulder, elicited a gleam of cold displeasure.

"You got it wrong," Rodney grinned down into the rolling eyes, "I'll certainly hand it to you, old friend, when it comes to putting over this Cup business. But you couldn't even dream millions of dollars enough to match her. Billee!"

It was a moment of silent drama. And the cattleman tore off a fresh chew from a much bitten plug. Then, as the plug returned to his pocket, and he bestowed the chew into a bulge of his cheek, his eyes came round and stared up into Rodney's face.

"Billee!" It was an echo. A startled echo that came a second time. "Billee!"

Rodney nodded.

"And she's put it right up to me—us," he said. "You see, I asked her the night of the dance. She laughed like she always likes to laugh. And she said if Coppermine couldn't beat her for the Cup I lose anyway."

Live Oak's further silence became portentous. Something was struggling behind his gloomy eyes and fighting a winning battle. His sombre regard lightened. Cheeks, that were little more than the skin that covered his bone, creased themselves fantastically. A single hand went up from his side. And of a sudden it fell to contact with a leather-sheathed knee with a resounding slap. And another sound accompanying the gesture was hardly human. It was a shock of laughter that seemed to have been torn from somewhere amidst a cast-iron world of metallic bowels. It exploded. And it died on the instant.

"Say!" he ejaculated. "That darn kid gal! She said that! Her! Gorl darn, Roddy, boy, that's our Billee! Sure!"

Live Oak stood as though transfixed by some new emotion that was beyond his powers of expression. "It certainly is," he went on after a pause.

Then his eyesockets seemed to widen further.

"Marry you?" he said. "Why the darn kid's been crazy to ever since she first see blue-grass on Blacktail. Ain't that that kid? Jest foolin' you, like she's most always foolin'. Makin' excuse like she didn't want." His hands gestured a gladness his expression refused to admit. "Wal, I guess it don't come amiss to us anyway. We'll call that kid's bet to a right show-down the way she's askin'. Listen, feller! I ben scared! I ben feelin' most like chawed yeller liver. But I ain't scared no more. You see, I was figgerin' dollars. I saw the chances of missin' 'em. But dollars don't signify no more. Billee! Ther's jest Billee, with her summer blue eyes, an' that darn tow hair that makes you guess the bunch of likker its gold could buy a boy. You're goin' to get her even though them Dagos over yonder do blow your mean guts right out of you, the way Benny says, an' sets her a widder woman while she's still a kid. That goes. Your little kid gal. Mates! You two! Say that colt's passin' you that Cup if I need to carry him past the winnin' post. Gee! I want to get right out an' holler hymns to a lousy harmonium!"

The man's transformation was complete. Gloom had passed. His big eyes were alight. He was oozing a joy that left Rodney wondering who was going to win the stake Billee had set up. He caught the infection of it. And he laughed because he simply had to.

Then from somewhere outside there came the sound of a spring wagon's wheels rattling. And it brought him a recollection of the real purpose with which he had sought Live Oak. His laugh passed. His eyes narrowed. His jaws set tight.

"But I'd nearly forgotten," he said, and watched the

cattleman return to sombre glooming. "I didn't get around to hand you that, or even to get a look at your colt. It was nothing so good as those things."

The restless eyes had steadied and Live Oak was watching.

"Surely," he said. "I guessed there was more."

"Ye-es."

Rodney glanced round at the open door. He moved over to it. The yard beyond was empty. He came back and his face was unsmiling.

"We'd best get right out into the open," he said with evident distaste. "I don't like any of it. And I just can't believe the implication a mind like yours will likely find in it. But there it is. It's your last night before running Coppermine into Calford. And I owe it to you to tell what I know. Young Woodley stands to clean up enough dollars to pay all his debts if Iron Bolt wins. If it doesn't he looks like shipwreck. The sharps have got their hooks into him so deep there's no escape except through Iron Bolt pulling that Cup. He's assured Billee that our colt won't win. Assured her positively. He's taken himself up into the hills just when he was to have gone into Calford with us for the race. And he hasn't got back."

Rodney gestured with flattened hands. It was a movement that denied credulity. Live Oak watched it. He turned his chew over and spat. And he contented himself with a casual acknowledgment.

"That's all right, Roddy, boy," he said quietly. "I'd heered tell—mostly."

Rodney looked into the dark eyes which were steadily regarding.

"I guessed your secret service wouldn't miss much," he went on, with a short laugh. "But it was up to me, though I hate it all and don't believe. It certainly looks like those sharps are setting the screw on him. They're giving him a mighty tough deal. So he's gone to earth. But there wasn't

need. And I'm sorry. I'd have staked him anything he wanted to make a clean up. And I intend to see him through anyway. You see, he's Billee's foster brother—"

"An' Jink Woodley's get!"

There was a smoulder of undying hate in the depths of the cattleman's eyes.

Live Oak and Stringer were watching the departure from just outside Coppermine's stable. The spring wagon and team were standing at the porch of the old ranch-house. A teamster was in the driving seat, while Rodney and his father snugged Sarah into the back seat of the vehicle. The care of it all was a little precious. But the cattleman remained coldly observing.

Live Oak could hear Benny's voice and Rodney's care-free laugh. And he listened to both. If he found approval of them he gave no sign. Awhile, and the teamster climbed down from his seat. And the huge Rodney took his place. There was a word. A laugh of farewell. And the wagon rolled away leaving Benny on the porch looking after it. Live Oak turned on the man beside him.

"Looks like we can get right on with things," he said sharply, and considered the confederate he had bought. "You gotta have that Dago rat Abie with you to-night. Ther's only him, an' that boy, Mike, up there with the boss now, left to the bunk house. The rest of 'em's in Black-tail cousin' likker at Mathersbee's, wher' they ain't likely to quit till sun-up. Benny's staked 'em plenty. So we haven't to worry about them. In awhile Mike 'll be out on the hill-top. So he'll be clear. You an' Abie best pack your rags an' blankets along. But you won't get sleep. Only him. You gotta set around an' never quit your watch on him. You're standin' fifty-fifty on the play. Get it? You'll be on that rat's tail wherever he moves. If he starts any foolishness you gotta know the reason. See?"

Live Oak gazed up at the porch where Benny was leaning contemplatively, a squat, square figure far-gazing at the last of the sunlight.

"Now I figger to make you before sun-up. That way your worry should let up." Live Oak went on, after a few moments deep consideration. "But I can't rightly say. Any-way you know just how you got to put it over if I find things amiss. Old man Smith's fixed right 'way down back o' the race-track boxes. That's wher' you lie up. An' you got Abie. An' if you can't handle that blame rat right I don't guess that fifty-fifty looks like buyin' you a fi' cent likker. If it starts to monkey you best kill it. An' I don't guess it'll be missed anyway. Now? Anything you need to know?"

The unclean face grinned confidently.

"Not a thing. 'Cep' when I draw that fifty-fifty?"

Live Oak's scowl was threatening.

"When you put it over, an' the colt's pulled the game," he snapped.

Live Oak stepped close up to the other. And Stringer's confident grin passed.

"See right here, boy," he said, with a quiet that Stringer found more than threatening. "My word goes if it's that fifty-fifty or filling your darn guts with the sort o' metal you can't digest. You can look for either, according the way you act. Best get that good!"

There was no grin on Stringer's hard face as he hurried away. And there was nothing in Live Oak's gloomy eyes, as he hurried up to the ranch-house, but a savage light of ruthless purpose.

Benny's face was alight with a monstrous satisfaction as Live Oak stepped up on to the porch.

"Sit," he cried, and sprawled himself into a chair. "And I'm not offering you likker. Looks like you've cleaned the decks right. Now tell me while that boy makes his getaway. Then we'll put it over."

CHAPTER XVI

Shadows in the Night

THERE WAS NEITHER RAIN NOR threat of snow. Yet it was storm. That frigid, bitter wind-storming which is constitutionally climatic of the hill country. It was booming, wrecking its way down off the far distant ice and snow, hewing a trail of destruction where the aged forests stood up defenceless in its blustering path. It had leaped from its eyrie amidst the glacial fields of the western peaks with the last of the daylight. And it was blasting its way through valley and gorge to the devil's playground of the prairies beyond.

The sounds of it were not unlike the pounding of storm-waters on a cliff-bound strand. There was likeness too, to the sweeping rush of loose shingle on an unsheltered beach in the lament of the tortured forests. And, prevailing everywhere, was that profound sense of desolation which drives the human mind to thoughts of the snug comfort of the city, where sound distractions at night at least sense companionship rather than outland isolation.

The October moon was at its full. But its efforts were no more than spasmodically effectual. An endless sea of storm wrack was scudding across the night sky, riding down out of the northwest in threatening masses. Only when adverse currents in the upper air were encountered was there any break in it. It was in those brief moments that a pitch black world was transformed into a realm of ghostly shadows.

The moon's light came and went in fugitive flashes. It momentarily lit up the barren hill-tops which sheltered the gracious valley in the depths of which nestled the old time buildings of Benny's homestead. It found brief, cold re-

flection in the meandering ribbon of the mountain stream which wound its way through the broad acres of its ploughing. It vaguely outlined the weathered facets of hoary crags, and the upward sweep of spruce and pine woods. And it also revealed the ghostly figure of an unmoving horseman standing out on a barren summit where was no shelter from the storming.

He was there precisely at the spot where Billee had sat to discover the approach of Rodney on his sorrel colt. It was clear above the forest limits where he had the full of such view of the homestead below as the night afforded. Like Billee he was observing it. But, differently enough, his pre-occupation was for the twinkle of pin-head lights which he knew to be lamp-lit windows.

His horse was big-framed and powerful. But the fleeting night light left its colour indistinguishable. The animal's Indian equipment of frame-saddle, and plaited bridle, were plainly to be seen. So, too, was the buckskin in which its rider was clad from head to foot.

It was just as a mass of cloud once more swept down out of the northwest to obscure the moonlight that the horseman displayed any sign of life. In the last of the ghostly light the horse turned and moved off towards the rock which once had sheltered Billee.

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When again the moon broke through the clouds it found a slim Indian figure afoot. It was in the act of emerging from the shelter of the sentry rock where its horse remained securely tethered. The man came hurriedly, yet with caution. And his gait had that familiar, bent-knee manner which is not unlike a ghostly glide. He was carrying something. Both hands were engaged. And the careful handling suggested the precious.

Cold moon curiosity seemed to be keenly whetted, for light persisted. It pursued the figure and never left it. It followed it down the rugged hill slope, for all its hundred

or so yards, to the dark line of trees which was the forest's clean-cut ending. Then, with the suddenness of a snuffed candle flame, light went out. But it had witnessed the man's passing within the forest's densely canopied sightlessness.

The pitchy darkness prolonged. The wind seemed to increase the ferocity of its howl. It screamed along the fringe of the forest as though seeking a prey which had eluded it. Then, abruptly as the light had passed, it re-kindled.

It was almost as though there was sensate control of the moon's doings. It was the timing of it. As the cloud wrack broke, and again the night world found its shape, two horsemen were occupying the precise spot where the other had stood.

They, too, were unmoving. They, too, were far gazing below at the infinitesimal window-lights. They, too, no less than the other, seemed to be wholly indifferent to the night's frigid wildness.

But there was nothing Indian in these. Dress and equipment were the common expression of the white man. The one bulked squarely and squat on a heavy saddle on the back of a raking broncho. The other, on a likelier mount of blood quality, was lean to emaciation.

Now the moon's light persisted miraculously. It levelled a long and generous scrutiny. It was almost as though it were searching to discover the mystery of so much secrecy. But disappointment waited upon it. Its efforts were quite unrewarded. And, as though in disgust, it again masked its face behind the welter of storm cloud.

It was with the passing of moonlight that the sound broke. It was not its volume that made it audible in the prevailing din. It was its quality, its contrast. It was the friendly whinny of a horse. And it prolonged, till finally it developed into a startling neigh.

The moon's light came back in a hurry. But when the darkness passed it was to discover that the two horsemen had disappeared as though they never had been.

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It was a lurid glow, widening, spreading, with lightning rapidity, and silhouetting a myriad of bare tree-trunks supporting the black mass of a canopy of drooping foliage. Its light was splashed with vivid spurts of flame. There was sharp crackling supervening a low-voiced but growing roar. Smoke was swirling upwards. It was ranging from a glowing centre to the right and left. And beyond the forest the howl of the gale was lost, overwhelmed by the startling fury of devouring flame.

The Indian came running through the trees. His speed was almost a race over the deep carpet of dry pine cones and needles which the ages had laid. There was fear in his speed. He made no pause for a backward glance. Nor was he concerned for what might lie to the right or the left of him. He was gazing ahead towards the black night beyond the forest's fringe where lay the safety of barren hill-tops rising to windward of the fire he had just lit.

It had all been calculated to a nicety. Just a hundred paces within the tinder-dry woods. He had chosen for his victim a heavily foliaged spruce of great height. He had emptied his kerosene on foliage and the perished, inflammable underlay. Then a match. It was the fell work of a few moments. The flame had almost literally exploded to the tree top. And the forest had been fired beyond any hope of salving it.

He was racing now to escape from that which he knew, would, in a few moments, become a furnace of living fire, wind-driven to white heat.

There was relief and welcome as moccasined feet smote the rough rock of the hill-top. But the man made no pause. There was no slackening of pace on the steep ascent. He ran till his bruised feet trod the site whence he had first witnessed the lamp-lit windows below.

It was a breathless eager madman who finally turned about and stood to feast his eyes and sate his fire-lust upon the holocaust he had wrought.

It was queer. There had been no dementia in the man's

objective purpose. Just a vicious hate. Revenge. His own selfish desires to be achieved. There had been determination to destroy the homestead with its tiny shining lights. The barns and other buildings backing into the forest. The horses they contained. Particularly the horses. It had all been deliberate, calculated. Now it was a frenzy in which every original purpose had been forgotten.

The man's dementia was there smouldering in his dark eyes, which reflected a blending of fire and moonlight. It was repetition of all that which had gone before at other times, other places, in other circumstances. He was savouring the wanton destruction, the glory of devouring flame, like any glutton mouthing a succulent morsel. Every sense was athrill. His whole being was swept with an ecstasy as consuming as was the fire he had lit. He was a living furnace of burning emotion held under only by the last straining shreds of restraint.

He watched the drive of the wind hurl the avalanche of smoke abroad, to fill the whole length and breadth of the great valley below him. He revelled in the pursuit of it by the wall of leaping flame which licked up high above the tallest of the forest trees. He delighted in the silhouette of the charred and naked reaching arms of mighty trees which the flames spurned behind them. It was all a glory of ruddy light driving the night shadows into hiding as surely as though it were the radiance of a noontide sun.

There was neither pity nor remorse. There was no sense of horror or shame. The man's battered prairie hat was thrust back off his head. And his fired eyes glared. There was no smile. There was no movement other than a faint twitching about his lips, as his breathing came rapidly and heavily. His slim body stood erect. His arms hung down at his sides. But his hands were clenched tight. There was tension in all of it. Every nerve was keyed and straining. And it looked like no more than a matter of moments before he transformed into a raving, distraught maniac.

A sound behind him was without effect. He was dead

to everything but that upon which his mind was set. A dozen sounds might break in the roar that was thundering its way down the valley slopes without breaking the spell that held him.

The sound came again. It was sharp. A queer kiss of something moving on the air. It passed. But only to come a third time. Something fell before his eyes. It was gone. And something drew tight about his body,囚禁着 his arms to his side.

His trance passed. He came alive, conscious and struggling. But the strangling noose of Live Oak's rope only drew the tighter. He was flung writhing to the ground to be dragged mercilessly, furiously.

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Live Oak stood up from his accomplished task. The Indian lay sprawled in a cruel attitude with hands and feet tied together behind his slim, buckskinned back.

Live Oak considered the man's clothing. He studied the smear of ochre dyeing face and hands. Then he glanced over at the square figure of Benny, standing beyond the trussed body.

"Play actin', too, I guess," he said slowly. "Settin' his dirt on to the decent back of a red-skinned neche. Say, Benny, it's jest about the right time for this darn get of Jinks' to be set where him an' his killer father belong. We don't have to guess for his cache. We'll jest set him fast to the saddle of that skewbald of his. An' we'll make that lake in the hills. We'll set right in at that hangin'-bee jest as soon as I can put the rest over."

"What about here and now?"

Benny's face was working as he stared down at their writhing captive. The roar of the flames below was droning maddeningly in his ears. But Live Oak's reply came swiftly, hotly.

"It's right up to you, boss," he cried. "But it don't look good to me showing Billee, an' boy Roddy, what's left of

him. Then the p'lice. His cache 'way back. It's kep his dead Ma's bones safe. Maybe it'll keep his where folks don't have to look at 'em."

But Benny was gazing down at the destruction of his life's work.

CHAPTER XVII

Jink's Deadhouse

THE WIND STORM WAS ABATING. But it was still driving in booming gusts with a cold that ate to the bone.

It was just turned midnight. And still the possibilities of the night could not yet be estimated. But, at least, inky darkness had yielded to a persistent moon, and a twilight glow had replaced it. The cloud-race was little more than fleeting scud.

The two men had completed the first stage of purpose upon which they had savagely decided. They were together, standing between the door of Jink Woodley's old-time deadhouse and the bare trunk of the aged black pine which overshadowed it.

Benny was regarding a broad-beamed, flat-bottomed boat whose make intrigued him. It was lying moored to a boulder on the island's inclined shore, adrift at the full extent of a rope that was not rawhide. Live Oak, in a queer pre-occupation, was far gazing at the great gorge out of which streamed the torrent he knew to be the headwaters of the Blacktail River, as well as the feed of the great tarn which the scrub-grown island centred.

There had been silence between them for some moments. A silence pregnant with satisfaction for that which they and their horses had already accomplished.

Benny pointed to the craft rocking on the wind-driven waters.

"Jink left a birch-bark when the fire got him," he said. "It's fifteen years since. Guess that boy, Nick, had to fix that outfit for himself if he was to use this cache of his. Queer. I guess ther's no darn college or anything else to breed out the stuff that lies deep in the bone. Makes you

wonder the play of it. Civilization!" He snorted a laugh. "It don't belong. It's just setting a coat to hide up what they don't need folks to see. Jink passed that quarterbreed all that was in him. And Grant's bunch just set a coat over it so folks shouldn't see."

He glanced up at the lower boughs of the tree which were drooping clear above his head.

"We've found better trees way back down at the old home, Live Oak," he added.

"Sure."

Live Oak glanced up indifferently at the shadows which the moonlight threw amongst the saddened foliage. Then he spat with some deliberation. And he trod on it with abstracted care.

"Guess I haven't ever had this shack far out of my mind," he said. "You got the kid right here on this beach stuff. When them darn fires started, after the boy quit college, I couldn't see a thing but this blame pimple standing right up in these waters. I had to get a look-see. And I found enough to tell me. Ther' wasn't that crazy barge then. An' I had to swim my plug across. But that door opened so easy I didn't have to guess. The place was full of truck same as if it was the house of them alive instead of the dead Jink buried under its floor. There was canned truck t' eat weeks, same like ther' is now. Ther' was blankets right for forty below. There was a bunch of weapons like that boy always uses. A dump of other junk, too, which was that play-actin' outfit the Blackfeet squaws has beaded. It was cached close. And I knew. And the way of it told me right then Nick Woodley was Jinks' get and hadn't unlearned the thing that killer had raised him to. Mabbe I'd have done better setting the p'lice boys wise. But these forests and hills is free, I guess. Then he'd been raised Billee's brother. Wal, I just didn't."

Live Oak's hands moved in a gesture of denial. And Benny was searching the deep hollows that shadowed his eyes. He lifted his shoulders indifferently.

"It don't signify," he snarled. "We got him hot foot. If he was own brother to God Almighty he'd get his the way we know. Think back, man. Our years! Yours and mine! Work? Christ! A dump of ashes to please a crazy crook. He can't live, Live Oak. Not with you and me around."

Live Oak considered the foliage above him.

"It's hell I got to get right back," he rumbled savagely.

Benny's eyes lit. But he shook his head with keen decision.

"It's no use figgering that way, old friend," he said. "It needs to go the way we planned. There's others, too, besides him in this. You'll have to get right back while I stop around. There's food. And there's blankets. And that crazy barn way across the water where he used to fix his plug. You got to get it there's no skunk of a darn Breed can put that stuff over and get away with it while there's a tree standing to these hills. We've man-handled niggers away back home for a hell-sight less, Live Oak. And a hanging takes the sort of time you haven't got to spare—now."

Live Oak considered regretfully.

"That's so, Benny," he agreed at last, and there was regret in it. "Anyway that sort of stuff is jest plain lynchin'. An' I guess we ain't no lynch outfit. He's got to get the sort of justice he'd find lyin' around a right judge's court. I ain't nursed our pore darn hosses these years to feel soft for any get of Jink Woodley's. I'm goin' to see his darn neche head falling sideway. An' his feet kickin' cold air. An' he'll get it right, the way they hand it out where the judge sets. He'll get time to think it good. He'll know most of two days' hell before he gets there. We'll run him up Sunday. An' it's a good day. That goes. It surely does."

The finality of it was unyielding. It was an expression of the real Live Oak. Standing there in the grim shadow of the deadhouse tree, arranging for the disposal of a youthful life, these cattlemen were shorn of the last vestige of humanity. They were merciless fighters in the battle of an age's old life.

Benny considered his confederate. And his eyes were hot.
"Lynch or no lynch," he snarled. "I don't care a curse.
He's to get his. And I'm here to see it. He's burnt us out.
Our home. He'd have burnt you and me, or anyone else.
Christ! He'll get the life strangled out of him the way it
should have been before Hester Wilford mothered him."

Live Oak indicated approval.

"I'll go pass him word. An' then I'll beat it," he said
eagerly. "That big colt of mine'll be through with his
feed. So we'll get across over."

Without awaiting reply Live Oak moved up to the deadhouse door and lifted the heavy wooden bar which had withstood the weathering of many years. The door swung inwards with an ease that suggested frequent use. The interior was pitch dark. Live Oak passed within. And he groped for a moment and found a hanging lantern hooked up on the crude log wall.

He took it down. He struck a match on his leather chapped thigh and lit the half burned candle inside it. Then he replaced it on its hook, and turned to the small mound of earth which significantly centred the hut.

There was a roof post at the mound's head. There was another at its foot, the door end of the deadhouse. There was a small square of wood nailed at the head post. And there was some writing on it.

Young Nick Woodley, still clad in his Indian make-up, was squatting on the head of the mound because he had no alternative. There was a rope about his neck. And it was fastened shortly to the head post. Hands and feet were similarly secured by lashings of rawhide.

He was secured beyond all chance of escape. The manner of it looked cruel enough. But it had been planned and carried out to leave him free from unnecessary physical suffering. The hut was a veritable storehouse of the needs of life. But the arsenal of weapons of which Live Oak had told had been removed.

The darkly stained face was raised expectantly as Live

Oak paused and looked down at it. There was burning hate in Nick's fine dark eyes. There was also something else. For perhaps the first time in his life young Nick knew that fear which must come at the thought of a hideous death from which there is no escape.

He made no sound, no movement. He just sat there, crouched at the head of his mother's grave. He was hating and fearful, but completely sane.

Live Oak's jaws were steadily masticating as he considered a boy whose breed alone was anathema to him. Then he spat, carefully avoiding the grave. Presently he spoke the purpose of his mind in short, convincing phrases.

"You got till Sunday," he jerked at him. "Then you'll be hauled up by the rawhide that's fixed to your neck right now. An' I'll do the haulin'."

He turned sharply. He reached the hurricane lamp and extinguished its candle. Then he passed out through the door and secured it carefully on the outside. He felt he had passed sentence in a manner that was judicially appropriate.

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Live Oak had the endurance of toughened steel. But the colt under him was just sheer bloodstock whose generosity knew no limits. So it was almost foundered as the man got down out of the saddle at the northwestern summits of the smoking and still burning valley.

The wind-storm had practically blown itself out in the night. The moon had just set. And its cold light had been replaced by a yet colder grey dawn, which still lacked any real tinge of a coming sunrise.

But these conditions left the cattleman untroubled. Live Oak stood regarding the devastation which had been wrought. His restless eyes were absorbing a vision that roused all the devil of his savage soul.

Live Oak's philosophy was never less than hurt for hurt for just so long as he had the necessary power to inflict it.

He possessed fine qualities of loyalty, devotion, and courage invincible. But his whole life was the fighter's, without mercy for himself or anybody else.

The horror of wanton destruction was there wherever he turned his angry gaze. The drift of smoke rising, screening or passing on away to the southeast, told him. Charred trees, shorn of all foliage, raised blackened skeleton arms to the high heavens in hopeless appeal. They were everywhere along the valley's slopes, while in the deeps below was a still glowing fire, and the dull sound of it as it ate its way onwards along the river banks wherever it found fuel on which to feed.

Live Oak found himself figuring, estimating. Here was a complete washout of his and Benny's life's work. And he was considering its repair. He had visualized just this for months. And now all the planning he had done came back to him. The wonderful range of stables for the stud which was his charge. The new house that would rise from the ashes of the old ranch-house. He was quite aware that the material damage was by no means beyond repair. But the crime of the destruction of it all remained.

Live Oak knew Benny's spirit and rejoiced in it. He knew the calm courage of the mother of Rodney. But, better than all, he knew the big heart of "boy Roddy," who had always been the child of his own stormy heart. With such companions he knew that no damage was irreparable.

It was bleak comfort and Live Oak finally spat his feelings as he turned away from a scene which savaged him. He strode back to his jaded colt and considered it. Despite its drooping its fine eye told him of invincible spirit, and he swung himself into the saddle.

A moment, and he was heading away to the southeast. Avoiding the still fired valley he rode the highlands for that retreat where he knew there would be those eagerly awaiting his coming.

CHAPTER XVIII

Calford and the News

CALFORD'S NATIONAL SPIRIT and feeling were intensely British. Its barometer of national affairs was its own thriving grain industry. That barometer had registered wild fluctuations in less than three months in place of its usually serene "set-fair." And, in consequence, it had discovered that a few thousand miles represented a far less distance than had seemed to be the case on the fourth of August.

Calford's reaction to the war in Europe had been unhurried. But the city could not remain unmoved while the flower of the British Army was retreating headlong, falling back on Paris, and enduring every sort of crashing disaster at the hands of the German War Lords of Central Europe. Thus, wherever men and women foregathered, the war's news became common topic. And no mental equipment was complete without an overshadowing of perhaps mute anxiety.

The citizens of Calford had by no means yielded to pessimism. They were virile, and possessed all the splendid optimism of a youthful and developing country. But, to the last man and woman, after nearly three anxious months, they had embraced the Calford Cup week with a glad relief.

The reaction was inevitable. In all the city's history there had never been so many Harvest parties given in one week. There had been intense rivalry amongst hostesses in lavish spending. There had been the sort of gaiety that had completely outraged the sad heart of "Mr. John D. Gloom." And the great race for the Cup, at the close of the week, became an event which had been promoted in its

importance to something approximating national significance.

It was a curious, but common enough characteristic of horse-racing, that, although this year there were some thirty entries for the Cup, and in all probability there would be at least ten starters, in the public's mind the race was to be a bitterly fought out duel between two unusually fine colts. It had become a situation of delicious piquancy. Billee Wilford had, of course, ridden before and won on a splendid filly, Jane of the River. But this year she was to be the principal protagonist in the fight between two owners who were the keenest rivals in the grain market, and, at the same time, were life-long, bosom friends.

So it came that men, women, and even children, awoke on the Friday before the race to a great looking forward to the day of the pool sellings. Their mood at breakfast was one of lighthearted anticipation, of a keen excitement. All depressing war news was deliberately thrust aside while they argued with cheerful recklessness the rival merits of the two colts. The day was crisp with a light keen wind and the vivid sunshine of early Indian Summer. What better could be asked? Then, of a sudden, the telephone demonstrated its place in the city's life.

It was rumour. Vague. Fantastic. It was rumour whose origin none seemed able to trace. But it flashed over the wires to every willing and unwilling ear alike and reacted accordingly. It was Coppermine! The great colt of Valley Deep! And, in every bemusing fashion possible, the story contradicted itself and varied every detail but its fundamental.

The fundamental implication was that something was wrong about Coppermine. It was said he was amiss. That the horse had broken down in its final wind-up. It was told that the horse had already been scratched. And that the big money gamblers betting Iron Bolt had known something right along. It prophesied that, in a manner of speaking, Iron Bolt would have a "walk over." There was an

impressive version of fire. Benny Hyles' homestead had been burnt out. Stables. Everything. In fact Coppermine had been so badly injured that the colt had had to be destroyed. Then the story took another line. There were dark hints that a bunch of the city's crook-gamblers had got at the beast and put it out. And, anyway, the entire telephone system of the city was quite satisfied that Coppermine *would not run!*

There was some shock, of course. But not too much. For the most part the whole thing was accepted with a grain of salt. Calford was used to that kind of thing on the day of the pools. It was a generally accepted form of market-rigging. The wise ones laughed and their breakfasts remained unspoilt. The nervous closely calculated their bets and considered "laying off." Others, who had yet to make their bets, found keen amusement. And the city generally continued its happy appreciation of the time-worn manœuvre until shortly after noon. Then all laughter died out flat.

It was the late arrival of a farmer hauling grain. He was from a far-outlying homestead where the lesser foothills built themselves into beehive hummocks of grass. He was from the southwest, too. The same direction as the more distant Lazy S. and Valley Deep. He was in no way concerned for rumours about the Calford Cup horses. But he was very much concerned for any fire which chanced in the forests of the greater hills.

He said there was a big fire still burning out to the west of his place. He could not be sure of its exact locality, of course. He had not been out to ascertain. But he believed it to be somewhere away beyond Grant Wilford's. Rather looked to be in the neighbourhood of Valley Deep.

It was sufficient. More than sufficient. The story of fire, and of Coppermine's destruction, had found its place in telephonic rumour. The fresh corroboration pointed reality and truth instead of market-rigging. In an hour or so it was broadcast throughout the city that Benny Hyles had been

burnt out. And that a dead Coppermine was definitely out of Saturday's race.

The Grand Palatine Hotel was crowded with guests for the racing. The restaurant was thronged at luncheon time. Billee and Aunt Sarah were away at a luncheon party. And Rodney and Grant Wilford had been left to eat alone.

Grant was eating unemotionally. He was of the type that found food no more than a necessary preoccupation. He was, too, quite unflattered at the thought of the morrow's race. Rodney, however, was commenting amusedly on the stream of urgent telephone enquiries that had reached him during the morning. And, in the midst of his talk, he espied the advance of a brass-bound figure dodging its way towards him amongst the crowd of tables and busy waiters.

It was the reception clerk from the hall office who had detached himself from his press of duty. Rodney was intrigued. The usual bell-boy had been dispensed with. He grinned across the table at the voiceless cattleman.

"Wonder what Coppermine's been doing now," he said. "Looks like another of 'em, Uncle Grant. Ought to be Doc Myer. He's about the only man I know who hasn't rung me up to tell me Coppermine's sick, or something. It's amusing. Live Oak tells me the Doc 'll about retire with a fortune if your colt wins."

Grant's eyes narrowed as he raised them from the plate he had steadily emptied to observe the approaching clerk.

"Guess that bird's never a big piece away when his nose smells carrion," he rumbled. "He'll know all the fool junk they're telling. And hope it's true."

There was no mistaking its tone. And Rodney understood. Doc Myer was one of young Nick's gambling associates.

He glanced up smilingly as the brassy splendour ranged up to his side.

"More of 'em, Barker?" he enquired. "I'll lay odds it's Doctor Myer of Blacktail?"

Barker's bald head, relieved of its brass-bound hat, shone brilliantly. His eyes were goggling behind horn-rimmed glasses.

"You've certainly guessed it, Mr. Rodney," he said, with his suave respect somewhat agitated. "I did my best to head him off. But he wouldn't have it. I tried refusing to interrupt you at luncheon. And he just said—er—Bilge!" Then he got sort of historical. He said: 'It took Nero or some other darn fool to fiddle while Rome burnt. And you best get right after it and tell Rodney Hyles his whole darn home's burnt clean out. Stables. Horses. Everything. There's nothing burnable in his home valley left standing. And if he wants to know more he can ring me, 512 Avenue, when he's done eating.' I sincerely trust, sir, it's—er—grossly exaggerated. It—"

The man broke off with his popping eyes goggling from one man to the other. But, as Rodney disappointed his sense of the dramatic by failing to look up, they finally came to rest on the startled cattleman, whose eyes were hard with an expression that was something more than mere amazement.

Rodney stood up without a word. He towered over the round form of the clerk. Then he moved off, hurriedly threading his way amongst the tables.

Reaching the domed vestibule he avoided the office where the girl clerk was ready to serve him at the telephone. He sought the privacy of the row of telephone booths, all of which, at the moment, chanced to be empty.

He put through his call. And the manner of it was of strained impatience. The doctor's voice replied to him at once. And there could be no mistaking the intended sincerity behind the rough manner of the man's sympathetic condolence.

"Hell, Roddy!" he exclaimed. "I'm so darn sorry I can't

tell you. It's the meanest thing of my life I got to do. I had to put it tough to get past that foolhead, Barker. Mathersbee's just rung me from Blacktail. He's all het up. Says you've got to get it because of Benny. He's got his stuff from your boys. They guess Benny and Live Oak were home at the valley last night. And they reckon they must have got it trying to get the horses and stuff out."

Rodney listened without interruption while the doctor's words came rapidly, agitatedly. The blue of his eyes was hidden. And something of the weather-staining of his plain face seemed to have faded out.

As the doctor paused Rodney nodded at the instrument as though at a living presence.

"Benny *was* home last night," he averred. "So was Live Oak. So was our colt. They weren't making the city, here, till this morning. Best tell me."

There was the sound of a clearing of the throat. Then the narrow limits of the box became filled with the faint sound of a distant voice talking rapidly. Rodney only interrupted it when the words became blurred. Otherwise he just stood listening acutely to a story whose tragic poignancy lost nothing in its brevity and lack of intimate detail.

Mathersbee had rung the Doctor shortly after noon. And the doctor had only delayed ringing the Palatine while he considered what was best to be done. He had, of course, heard the morning's rumours and disregarded them. Finally he decided to ring Rodney in preference to calling round at the Palatine. Mathersbee's story was obviously reliable. He said there had been worry overnight because, about seven o'clock in the evening, a fog of smoke had blown down on the gale out of the hills. The boys from the valley were "hitting it up" in his bar at the time. And they all—and so did he—figured that smoke was blowing out from somewhere around the valley. But none of them were for quitting their liquor to ride out to see. In the night Blacktail was heavily blinded with smoke. At daylight,

this morning, the boys had sobered. And they started back home right away.

Mathersbee saw no more of them till they returned just before he rang up. They said it was "one hell" of a forest fire which had burned Valley Deep clear out. It was still white hot and burning. It was blinded with smoke so they couldn't rightly tell. And they were nearly crazy with the scare of it. They'd done their best. They had tried around in every direction to locate things. All they could get was there was nothing of the farm buildings left standing. The bunk house, with all their belongings, was gone. And they could not discover a sign of life anywhere. Not even the yap of a dog or anything. It looked to them Benny and Live Oak must have got caught up trying to get the horses and the few beeves and milch cows out of the corrals. So far as they could tell there was nothing that could burn left undestroyed. They could not even discover a single tree on the valley slopes that had not been charred to a leafless stump. With no sign of Benny or Live Oak to be found they had returned to Blacktail that Mathersbee might get on to Rodney at Calford.

The story was swiftly outlined as though the doctor hated his task and desired to get it over as quickly as possible and with as little emphasis upon its implication as he could make. It ended with that abruptness which suggested frank refusal of personal comment. And it was followed by an ominous silence while he awaited reply.

Rodney stood there like a man stunned. The receiver remained at his ear. He was no longer listening. He was thinking swiftly while a dozen or so questions flashed through his mind. But he asked none of them.

When at last he roused himself to reply it was to terminate their talk in the briefest possible manner. There was no expression of any emotion. Nor was there warmth or cordiality in the manner of it.

"Thanks, Doc," he said curtly. "I'll get on to Blacktail myself."

He hung up the receiver. And passed a big hand back over his fair head.

The full weight of the blow had fallen. Rodney had recited the story which had come to him over the telephone. And all joy of looking forward to the morrow's race had evaporated.

It was a tragic little gathering in Grant Wilford's private sitting-room in the hotel. It was high up on the ninth floor. An expensive apartment that was extravagant in its modern hotel furnishing, luxurious with an equipment which entirely robbed it of any sense of human intimacy.

Beyond one of its windows was a glorious, distant view of alabaster mountain summits which plunged into a welter of towering snow clouds. Sarah Hyles was gazing mistily at the picture of it. And she was as near to tears as her courage would permit. She was still clad for the lunch party from which she had fled when the city's news, brought in by the farmer, had reached her.

Billee was poised on the well-sprung arm of a divan chair. The hardness of her father was looking out of her lovely eyes. And her pretty brows were sharply drawn in a frown of suspicion and heavy thought. Grant Wilford had his broad back to an ornamental fireplace that was filled with the gilded pipes of a radiator. His eyes remained hidden in a regard of the thick rug under his feet. Rodney alone displayed real alertness and activity of mind. He was watching his mother with anxiety. He was listening to words that came straight from her stricken heart quite unsupported by the courage that was usually hers.

"Oh, Roddy," she cried desperately. "Don't you see, boy? Benny! There alone. Helpless in the midst of—of a blazing world. I must go to him. I can't leave him to face it alone. Think of it. Our home. All that ever really mattered to him—us. The race doesn't matter to us now. Nothing matters but Benny. Please, boy. Say you'll drive me back—back home right away."

It was a little pathetic final gesture of pitiful hands. And it smote the big son so that he came swiftly across to the window as though to protect.

"But there's no sense to it, dear," he persuaded, laying a caressing arm about his mother's shoulders. "You don't quite get it. If Benny got caught by that fire he's dead. If he didn't you'll make him and Live Oak just look like two fool men, which they aren't. Of course we know they were both there last night. But do you think they'd be caught by it when they've both—we all have—thought of fire on those northern slopes years? Those boys couldn't get near. Hardcase boys ready to face most anything. The valley was still afire. It was white-hot, with a smoke fog they couldn't see or breathe in. You need to look at it clear. You—."

"Sure." Grant looked up from the rug. And his eyes were like cold steel. "Roddy's got the sense of it, Sarah, my dear. If those boys were caught they're—roasted. But they weren't. You can bet your life. Not if I know Benny. An' I guess I do. Benny's around somewhere. You couldn't burn up that Kentucky pirate with any darn hill fire. And he'll sure feel tough when he gets along here to find you chasing up the thing he's mighty glad to be clear of."

The hard sense of it carried conviction. Billee bestirred and opened her lips to add her persuasion. But they closed again. And she remained silent. Rodney removed his protecting arm.

"We're going to see Benny right here to-morrow, Ma, somehow," he said more easily. "There's no meanness to Benny. And he'll get around to see Billee help herself to—our—Cup. We've all got to stop around till the valley cools and clears. After the race we'll get right out. And Uncle Grant and Billee here 'll house us. Then we'll sit in, all three of us. Benny as well. And figure out. Sure it's best the way Uncle Grant says."

There was strength in these two big men. And their urge was marvellous in its effect. Sarah turned. She looked at

the confident Roddy. And the hard-set face of the cattle-man. Her bad moment passed. She accepted the sanity of it, as she never failed to when appeal was made to her reason.

"I think maybe you're both right," she sighed, with the corners of her firm mouth still ominously drooping. "Benny scoffed. But he knew the risks from those northern woods. And Live Oak spent his life watching them. But, oh, my dears, I feel so badly. I know poor foolish animals when there's a fire. I've heard their cries. And—and—seen them panicking. It's—it's awful. Think of those dear, silly old cows, and the beeves, in the corrals. Then the barns. Those wonderful horses. Coppermine! Oh! I—I think I'll go to my room. I—It's been such a shock. I—"

She turned and fled. There was no doubt of it. Rodney saw the tears as they welled and overflowed as his mother rushed from the room. Rodney started to follow her. But Grant's tones came in a diapason rumble as the door closed behind her.

"Best leave her, boy. You, too, Billee. Those tears are goin' to help her. Leave her have 'em. She knows we're around to pass her all the help she needs."

Billee had sprung from her chair. But she remained at her father's drawled order. Grant regarded Rodney *levelly*. And there was meaning behind his gaze.

"Guess I'll be getting around, boy," he rumbled on thoughtfully. "I reckon to put over a question or two. Maybe I'll locate the Doc. That bird was quick on his carriion. Looks like making a clean picking of the bones with Coppermine out of the race."

Rodney looked into the hard eyes that narrowed slowly. There was no mistaking the suspicion they made no effort to conceal. He made no reply. But his fair head inclined. Grant turned and looked over at Billee. There were moments while he considered her frown. Then he moved towards the door. The passing of his huge personality seemed to leave the room a little empty.

Billee saw the door close behind him. She heard the click of its lock. Then her unsmiling gaze turned on the man she knew she could always look to. Suddenly her hands were out-thrust in appeal.

"Roddy!"

Rodney, too, was unsmiling. He came to her with swift strides. He possessed himself of those hands and held them crushingly.

"What does it mean, Roddy?" Billee flung at him. "I'm—I'm—scared."

Rodney abruptly released the hands. He watched them fall limply to Billee's sides. Then he turned to the far mountain scene which had held his homeless mother. His fair head moved negatively.

"I don't know—yet," he said after a pause.

"But Benny! Live Oak!" Billee urged. "Why aren't they here by now? Why? If what you and my Daddy guess is true?"

Again came a thoughtful negative movement of the man's head.

"Oh, it's true, all right, little kid," he sighed. "If I didn't think it I wouldn't be here right now. Whatever else that fire means it never got those two. I just can't guess the thing that's happened. I don't know why Benny's not got around. Whatever it is it's not the fire keeping him. No hurt's come to dear old Benny."

Billee stood there staring straight into the eyes she loved, as though she would search deep behind them into his mind. Her own were clear and bright, but infinitely troubled. Rodney breathed deeply as he watched the play of emotion which revealed itself in the coming and passing of the colour in the pretty, unsmiling face. He suddenly reached and engulfed her in his arms. And as he did so her trouble finally revealed itself.

"Nick!" she cried. "Oh, Roddy! Where—where is he?"
she faltered.

CHAPTER XIX

Live Oak Puts It Over

THE UNTAMED SPIRIT OF CAL-
ford's older cattle days was still vital in the hearts of its citizens, and once a year it reared its defiant head. It was there in riotous being as Saturday's noon approached and a human tide streamed out from avenue and cross-town street to debouch upon a carefully prepared modern race-track.

It moved like a joyously ruffling eddy on the cold flood of enlightened life. There was the bubbling of gay laughter which was almost out of place on the hard faces set with the grim of modern struggle. At least one day's riotous enjoyment was to be permitted. And the old time human spirit, loosed from its bondage, was reacting the more surely for the background of war-worry to every thinking mind.

The Cup Race had come down through the years as an annual event from the time when the city's race-track was no better than open prairie that knew no more preparation than a casual filling up of gopher holes. When spring wagon, and buckboard, and top buggy, were its only grand stand. When racing was a mix-up of white and red. When it embraced the flat, the sticks, and all that brilliant trick-riding beloved of cattleman and Indian alike. Now blood-stock had largely replaced humble broncho cow-pony and Indian cayuse. But the human spirit it invoked remained quite unchanged.

Now, too, the track was smart and up-to-date with lavish spending, and because of civic pride. It had been carefully modelled on the best British lines rather than American. Its manners and management were acquired from

the same source. And, from grand stand to starting gate, it told the world of its smug self-satisfaction.

Noon found a miniature sea of humanity thronging its purlieus. It was almost complete. Grand stand and enclosures were filled to overflowing. A vast concourse was lining its home "straight" for nearly a furlong of its length. And the winning post was a centre that was densely congested. There was animation and hurried bustle. There was noise and vivid colour. For Calford, pretty well the whole of it, was going about its holiday occasions with time-honoured festival.

In twenty-four hours Rodney had known little enough peace from the telephone which rang him from every corner of the city. He had hoped for respite on the grand stand but found none. Instead, he wanted to liken it to a witness box under a fiery cross-examination. Sympathy. Curiosity. Reproach. Cold incredulousness. He ran the gamut of human reaction till he wanted to hurt every face that approached him to inflict comment of any sort upon his home disaster. Finally he left his mother to the sworn protection of a bodyguard of intimate elderly friends while he went off alone in search of escape from friends and acquaintances.

But the sunshine of the day had become a black-out for Rodney. Wherever he moved amongst the crowd he was known. It mattered not whether it was across the track beyond the judge's box. Whether the paddock, or the track itself. Everywhere he realized a sense of antagonism, resentment. It was there in every sidelong glance as he passed. In the nod in his direction. And in the swift, whispered remark to some sullen-eyed companion. He felt like a pariah in a city where popularity had always been accorded him.

There were moments when he hated. There were moments when he wanted to laugh despite the disaster which had befallen. It sickened him bitterly. He understood. And it only hurt the more. It was the money loss of it all. He,

through his beautiful colt, had let the people down. It was the merciless resentment of the herd whose leader had failed it. He, Rodney, had robbed hundreds of that crowd of the mean dollars they had staked on his Coppermine.

He knew Grant and Billee would be down at the box where Iron Bolt was temporarily stabled for the race. He did not go near them. He had no intention of doing so till after the race. He had already faced a battery of questions from Billee. He could face no more at present. Later it would be easier. Later he would know. And—

He reached the paddock and took up an unobtrusive position at the rail to watch the first race for which a mounted Police bugler had just sounded the "Boot and Saddle."

It was a catchweight sprint for local farmers' ponies. They had to be under fourteen-two hands. It was an annual preliminary scramble before serious racing started. A merry rough and tumble that would yet be fought out with grim determination and in bitter rivalry.

The bugle loosed a flock of tatterdemalion horseflesh and riders upon the course. They were mostly tough, speedy cayuse bred down from old Indian stock. They were veritable machine workers. And they fluttered off towards the start at every imaginable gait known to their species.

It was a wild, howling race. The riders shouted as they came up the straight, whooping like old time cattlemen. And the onlookers roared their appreciation of the fun of it. It was one hugely merry event that was partisan to a degree. And Rodney felt the better for it as they scrambled on past him for the winning post.

The obscurity of Rodney's place at the paddock's rail served him well during the half hour before the next race. The crowd was gathering behind him to glimpse the horses on parade. But with his back deliberately turned he passed almost unnoticed.

The second race was an open mile and a half over the

Cup course. The entries for it were principally circuit horses of quality and trickery. There were one or two local platers of some quality. Particularly one, George Bereton's Grey Eagle. It was a speedy stayer that had picked up quite a nice packet of money in its time. But it was aged. And the circuit horses were unknown quantities except to their owners. Rodney knew that the overnight pools had made another grey—the Wolf—favourite. It belonged to the man, Al Fisher. He was interested to see how the race would work out.

He watched eagerly. And he smiled at the cunning finish. The old plater Grey Eagle won by a clever neck. But the cleverness was not on the part of the winner so much as the loser. It was the fashion in which Al Fisher's favourite was held to lose while apparently being flogged to get the last ounce out of it. Rodney felt it would be interesting to know how many Grey Eagle pools the owner of The Wolf had bought overnight.

But Rodney was brought back to his own affairs by the numbers for the Cup Race. Instantly, as they began to go up on the board, everything else was swept from his mind. His thoughts flew to Live Oak and Benny who had not yet appeared on the course.

There was added babel as the numbers for the great event of the day appeared. The first to go up was Iron Bolt's. And a cheer arose from somewhere across the course. Then, in rapid succession, ten other numbers followed. There was a brief delay. And it was followed by a twelfth which hushed the crowd. It was Coppermine's number.

Rodney understood. It simply had to be. He had not scratched his entry. The unthinking crowd were amazed to see a dead horse's number amongst the starters. Rodney grinned. In a queer sort of way he felt he was getting something of his own back on those who had regarded him askance.

He stood up from the rail. He felt he could more cheer-

fully face the crowd. He turned back. And he moved towards the tanned track where horses were parading. Outwardly he was coldly calm. But secretly his pulses were hammering as his thought centred on Live Oak.

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Rodney saw them enter the paddock from its far end, where the line of horse-boxes stood reaching out down the side of the track. Billee and her father were walking behind their saddled colt. They were in earnest talk. At least Rodney guessed the talk to be mostly Billee's. The red-headed and freckled Seeds was leading Iron Bolt. He was smiling in a grossly self-satisfied fashion. The iron-grey was beautiful beyond words with its hint of roan in its colouring. To Rodney's judgment the creature was trained to the moment. And it stirred in him a little twinge of conscience.

The colt was led on to the thick tan parade and moved on round the ring of it with thrilling life in its every step. Grant and Billee remained at the edge of the tan observing its every movement. Other colts were arriving from the boxes. And the parade filled up.

Rodney gazed across from the iron-grey to Billee. There was such a keen business air about her. She just revealed her dainty leathers below the edge of her long dust coat which concealed her breeches and silk. She was bare-headed with her mass of red-gold hair bound lightly about her head. It was her one outrage of convention. She would not wear a jockey's cap. She had her hands deep in the pockets of her dust coat. And in one was buried the butt of her gold mounted whip.

Billee's wandering gaze found his. And somehow Rodney's conscience eased as he grinned and waved in response to a flourish of her whip. The warm violet of her eyes compensated him for much. He told himself, that, whatever the day brought forth, with Billee the whole goal of his life, he was justified.

It was just as Billee and Grant moved to come round to him that Rodney caught the sound of a familiar voice in the press of those watching the parade from behind him. It was the Blacktail doctor's. With no desire to make contact Rodney kept his broad back severely turned.

"You don't have to worry, William," Myer was saying in a low, confidential tone. "It doesn't signify a thing. It just means they had to run his number up. They simply hadn't troubled to scratch the colt. That's all."

Then came another voice which was less familiar.

"You're a sight too easy, Doc. If I didn't know you I'd say 'trusting.' I don't like it a bit. They're a slick bunch belonging. Some of 'em. They're bright enough one way and another. But it isn't just that, either. It's those pools last night. There was a tough crew buying the colt like it was right. And the more the city was buying others the easier the price they were making. If—if—" There was a short, harsh laugh. "Those guys 'll skin the darn city. And they were like they couldn't get enough to satisfy them. I don't like it. They were folks we didn't—"

But Rodney heard no more. The voice broke off as Seeds halted his colt opposite him. The freckled face was turned on him in a real regret there could be no mistaking.

"Say, Mr. Rodney," he cried, with twinkling cordiality in his cheerful eyes, and the tone of his voice changed from an original Oxford manner to something of the West, "it's just the meanest thing out of hell. Sure I'll be glad enough to see our Billee clear the judge's box leading the rest of a mean field. But not this way. I'm feeling sick to death of the stuff I've been hearing from the folks. They reckon he got it with all the rest of your Jade stock. They reckon there wasn't a 'hand' around with time to clear them from their boxes. Man, it's ghastly thinking that way of horseflesh. I could vomit when I think of a poor colt's scream."

Rodney nodded with cordiality.

"Thanks, Seeds," he said. "It's good hearing from you.

But I might know I'd get nothing else. But he's fretting. Don't keep him standing. There's Billee over there getting worried."

Seeds passed on. And Rodney felt a hand grip his arm from behind.

"Say, I didn't recognise that big back of yours, Roddy." It was Doc Myer. "I was wondering when I'd run into you. You know Hardy, don't you? We were just talking about your colt. We saw them run up his number. I take it you hadn't worried to scratch him."

Rodney looked into the lean, hawk-like face. And it was without pleasure. Even in a hardcase prairie settlement the doctor was only well regarded for his medical and surgical skill. For the rest he belonged to a school that was known for an astuteness that bordered on something else. Rodney nodded at Will Hardy, from whose face protruded an expensive cigar. He was dressed with elaborate care. But Rodney coolly disregarded him.

"Does it matter?" he asked sharply. "I'd say we folks have enough worry without troubling to scratch a mule. Let alone the world's best horse west of the Atlantic."

The doctor accepted it for bitterness. And he went on with heavy impressiveness.

"Man, it's too dire to think about," he sighed. "Mathers-bee said the boys reckoned a skitter couldn't have lived in the pit of your valley. Was Live Oak on the souse or something? The boys were. Have you been along out? Benny around? I haven't seen him."

Rodney shook his head.

"You don't have to think about it. We're doing that," he said ignoring all the rest.

Hardy removed his cigar.

"You weren't at the pools last night," he said interrogatively. "It beats me. There was a crazy bunch around buying your colt all they could get of him. As if they liked dead meat," he added with a laugh.

Rodney considered the gambler. And his manner was

an affront. Doc Myer jumped in to save the situation.

"Of course I know you were all bothered with those woods back of your building," he said at random. "That's why you let years pass without fixing a reasonable fire break. You surely did leave it good for our firebug. Haven't seen young Woodley around either?"

But Rodney was spared reply. It was the blasting of "Boot and Saddle." And the arrival of Billee and Grant. Billee took possession of him as Grant signalled Seeds with the colt.

"Oh, Roddy," she cried. "I feel like nothing so much as a paltry mean thief."

She had unfastened her dust coat to remove it. Rodney assisted her.

As Rodney passed the garment to her waiting father, Billee looked up into the big plain face with a world of warmth in her regard.

"Even our poor little bet's off," she went on, in a low tone with a little glimmer of smiling pathos. "Our little bit of childish sport. Has to be, I s'pose. And we've always been such rivals with our horses, haven't we? Now we'll never know which—"

"Can't be helped, Billee," Rodney broke in quickly, and stooped to leg her into the saddle while Seeds held the colt.

He lifted her like some small feather. And he watched her settle herself in the saddle with knees up. He grinned.

"But I've got those papers safe enough," he went on. "They're fixed anyway. And nothing 'll stop them going through the way I said. You see, you'd never have got me standing for that bet if I'd lost. I'd have welshed on it."

He came close up to the saddle as Billee picked up her reins and smiled down at him.

"All God's good luck to you, little girl," he grinned up at her softly. "And," he added, in a whisper which Billee alone heard, "all my love."

The colt moved off. The crowd opened. And Seeds led

the iron-grey out towards the paddock gateway. Other horses had already gone out. And as they came to the gateway Billee turned in her saddle and looked back. Her face was deeply flushed with the joy of the ride ahead of her. She nodded farewell at her father and lover.

Then she was gone with Iron Bolt fighting his bit to the accompaniment of the crowd's cheers of encouragement.

"There goes the biggest snip ever picked up on this track!"

It came with a laugh as the grey passed out of view. Rodney turned. It was the doctor. And Rodney looked him squarely in the eye.

"Think so?" he challenged quietly.

"Don't you?"

The retort rapped to the accompaniment of quick suspicion. But Rodney's shoulders only lifted.

"I've heard you're packing your bank roll with a fortune if the grey pulls it," he said. "I won't be a hypocrite and wish you 'good luck.' "

It was deliberate. And the doctor was still savagely regarding as a sudden burst of cheering broke distantly far down the course.

It was startling. It was away beyond the horse-boxes and growing in volume and becoming articulate. It seemed to drop to nothing. But only to come again louder and nearer. Then, in a moment, it reached the multitude at the grand stand and judge's box. Calford was roaring its lungs out.

"Coppermine!"

In an instant, stampede. The whole paddock. It was a rushing, jostling mob charging for the rails. Rodney and Grant were caught in it, and used their size and weight to ensure a front place. In their wake came the Blacktail doctor and Will Hardy. They reached the guarding rails with forcible impact. And Rodney, who had snatched at his race glasses, found himself craning and peering.

Rodney drew a deep breath as though emotion made it

difficult. He saw. And the sight he beheld made him want to shout with hysterical laughter. Coppermine was coming up the course from away beyond the last horse box. And the colt moving at a long, daisy-cutting, leisurely stride, was a vision of sedate golden beauty.

Rodney's heart was pounding sledge-hammer blows of excitement and delight. He saw the horse lengthen its stride to overhaul the rest of the field, now halfway to the start. The rake of it was superb in its composure and ease. And as the machine-like movement brought the big beast abreast of the paddock, and carried it on towards the grandstand he knew a wild thrill.

The multitude of Calford had become yelling pandemonium.

Rodney could have yelled with the wildest of them, but he found no voice. Nor, had he done so, would it have been for the sight of the colt, which he had anticipated from the first. It was something which filled him with a greater gladness, and assured him of the triumph he looked for.

There was no crooked halfbreed, Abie, astride of Coppermine's saddle. That nightmare of his had gone for good. It was the be-chapped figure of the one rider on earth he knew he could trust. Live Oak! Live Oak, just as though he were at common exercise! Lifted over his colt's neck, with his unclean cotton shirt bellied in the breeze, his open cloth waistcoat flapping, his gun holsters packed with unnecessary weight, and his restless, sunken eyes cold with an expression of supreme content!

Live Oak! Live Oak had put it over! Live Oak!

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Rodney was still leaning on the rail searching the distance towards the start. The crowd had stamped afresh. This time for the grand stand and judge's box. But Will Hardy and the Doctor still remained as though the disaster of that vision of Coppermine had robbed them of all further interest in the race that was yet to run. The big,

mute Grant, too, remained. But his whole interest seemed to be in observing the discomfited gamblers.

Doc Myer's voice rasped with something akin to a snarl. And it was directed at the leaning Rodney.

"It looks to me like there'll be a bunch of questions put and answered," he said, with an ugly lift of the lip. "It looks like someone's put it over a whole darn city full of boobs. Fixing the market, eh? It's the sort of thing that don't belong among white folks."

Rodney snapped his binoculars shut and jammed them back into their case with threatening force. He turned, swinging about with the swiftness of an enraged panther. The blue of his eyes flashed with consuming fury. And in them was a match for that which shone in the loyal Grant's as he, too, considered the man from Blacktail.

"That's right," Rodney cried in a tone that reminded of cold steel. "There'll be questions. And their answers. But they won't be the questions or answers you'd have them be, Doc. Our forests were fired in the hope of getting that dumb colt. Fire! For a colt like that! And to fill someone's bank roll. Live Oak knew right along. And he was ready for it. Sure there'll be questions. And they'll be set to those who reckoned to profit by Coppermine being out of the race."

CHAPTER XX

Coppermine

THE ALMOST DEMENTED HYSTERIA with which Coppermine's startling appearance was greeted found expression in every form of clatter and din which human mind and hand could contrive. It was the sort of moment when conventional flag-waving had been indicated. But finding itself unprepared in such a direction the mob had resorted to anything and everything that could produce a welcoming sound. It had to have noise. It did not matter how. And the louder the better. It had it. And it was a precious exhibition of gladness and cordiality that might well have melted the frigid heart of an iceberg.

Yet no iceberg could have sailed up the course, and remained less affected by the warmth of welcome, than did the eager Coppermine and his grotesquely equipped jockey.

It was a splendid exhibition of perfect schooling and skilful horsemanship. Coppermine was eager to race for his life. Every nerve in his splendid body was probably tortured to distraction by the riot of the demonstration going on about him. Yet the creature's gait remained wholly unhurried. There was neither shy nor fluster. And scarcely a sweat-damped hair could have been found on its laid-back shoulders. The horse simply lumbered along towards the starting-gate with his low-actioned, sweeping stride that yet spurned massive lumps of distance under perfect heels.

The horse-knowledged crowd was by no means unob-servant. While it howled itself hoarse it noted the colt's demeanour and gait with the keenest approval.

For Live Oak the triumphal progression of it was anti-climax. He had had his moment upwards of two hours earlier. And it had been the sort of moment which he had hugged to his lean bosom with the whole-hearted ardour of any striving spinster moving up to her bridal altar.

But then the by-ways of the cattleman's mental processes were labyrinthian. They possessed nooks and crannies that were no less grotesque than his personality. His life was a simple field of battle which permitted of no armistice. Service with him could only be performed in conjunction with incorruptible loyalty. His religion was the will to defeat. In it he had no place for godliness. And only a casual regard for cleanliness.

But one passion stood out above all others. It was the ravishing dream of his life to possess resources that needed no counting with which to endeavour the impossible task of assuaging an insatiable thirst for the rawest of raw "likker."

That dream looked like coming true at last. And the news of it had reached him in the ramshackle barn which stood at the back of "old man" Smith's saloon, away down the track beyond the race-track horse-boxes. It had been brought to him by his own hardcase gang of intimates who were the overnight buyers of Coppermine's pools. They had bought to the utmost extent of Live Oak's resources, at prices which might well have gladdened the heart of the most rapacious bargain-hunter. In consequence Live Oak had enjoyed a full half hour of Paradise while he sat calculating the extent of the wealth he intended to divide with the unclean Ropes on a basis of "fifty-fifty."

Live Oak observed no variation of attitude as the starting gate came towards him. He needed no study of those others it was his business to defeat. Every horse and rider in the race was known to him as a result of unscrupulous espionage. His knowledge was as complete as that of any other shrewd business man concerned with his rivals'

affairs. One swift glance satisfied him. It showed him a flushed and amazed Billee regarding him from the saddle of her beautiful, manœuvring iron-grey.

Live Oak went across to the extreme outside of the course to take up his place for the start, which was twelfth in the draw.

His tactics had the cold directness acquired through long experience of a chequered life about race-tracks. His whole concern was for Coppermine, who had now become transformed to a living volcano of equine racing spirit. He needed a wide berth clear of any mishance from flying heels. That was all. And it was a triumph of skill, that, when the gate went up to a moderate start, Coppermine was abreast of an avalanche of flying horseflesh, but with several yards of open separating him from it.

Live Oak found time to breathe a profound curse of relief as he settled down to ride.

The Cup Course followed the natural contours of the original prairie. There had been no attempt to build out its difficulties. There was a steep fall from the start to a level bottom. Beyond was a compensating rise to a big bend that was known locally as the "penitentiary." From the bend Nature had provided a decline that was characteristic of a world-renowned classic British course. And which, in consequence, was prideful to the hearts of Calford's loyal citizens. Then came the "corner" into the straight, which was upwards of three furlongs in length, and steadily rising to the winning post.

It was a course for judgment and horsemanship rather than recklessness. And Live Oak reserved recklessness for moments when his "likker" saturation chanced to be adequate.

(*)

Billee was startled. She was mystified. She was almost staggered. Coppermine! Coppermine after all! The colt was not dead, cruelly burnt alive. He was not even singed.

On the contrary, she was regarding the splendid vision of him as fit as any fiddle and twice as beautiful. And even in those moments of her first amazement she remembered that Rodney had never once said that any hurt had come to him.

And Live Oak in the saddle! Live Oak instead of the detestable Abie! Live Oak with his gloomy eyes, his almost historic skill, and his gun-holsters packed as though he were attending a shooting match rather than Calford's Cup race! Billee's questions flashed through her quick mind. Why? What did it all portend? And the only answer she found was a swift self-assurance that, with Live Oak there, it was reasonable to believe that her beloved "Uncle" Benny must be safe, too.

There was no time for anything more. Her horse needed all her skill in manœuvring for position. And when the gate finally released them the girl had the satisfaction of her colt jumping into third place. There was Charlie Tomlin on his raking bay heading a sleek black colt, which she knew to have been bred in Ontario, leading her.

As a speeding bunch of reckless horseflesh precipitated itself at the sharp descent Billee wanted to laugh with a new joy. The vision of Live Oak and Coppermine reminded her that she was no longer a paltry, mean thief stealing the Calford Cup from under her unfortunate lover's unattractive nose.

Billee's confidence in Iron Bolt had never been more complete. She weaved her simple plan as they went down the hill. She would hang to those two leaders and accept any pace. She had glimpsed Live Oak's figure widely on the flank. And she knew she dared not cede him any advantage of place.

The girl was a vivid picture of fresh youth in her white cord breeches and the black of her leathers. Her silk jacket, tailored by her own nimble fingers, threw the red-gold of her closely netted hair into harmonious relief. Her slim lightness gave her colt so little to carry. And, riding

high on her stirrups, the horse could have known little more than the weight of perfect hands.

At the level bottom of the dip Billee's plan further developed. She called on her colt sharply. She swerved clear. And Iron Bolt ran into second place for the climb of "the penitentiary." She could have laughed in her excited glee at the ease of it.

It was a gruelling climb, and Billee revelled in the sight of Charlie Tomlin's bay coming steadily back to her. Charlie was at least twice her weight, of course. But it was a happy omen. She thought of Coppermine and wondered. But she yielded to no curiosity. Ahead of her still was the big bend and the big leader. And all her eyes were needed for them.

The swiftly approaching bend suggested opportunity. And Billee snatched at it. She was in good position. The bend was level, and easy in its leftward turn. Why not? She would ride wide, finally head the bay, give her colt its full freedom, and collect all available distance before the vicious corner into the straight which she would ride as circumstances dictated. Coppermine must be disregarded as a mere ominous spectre until he decided to materialize.

At the bend Billee took hold of Iron Bolt. The colt's response was instant and almost miraculous. In a few strides Charlie Tomlin was behind her, with his high-actioned bay pounding the iron-hard track while Billee had crossed clear of him, and stolen his rails.

But Billee had begun to realize a certain unease. It was all going too smoothly and easily the way she wanted it. The sound of the pounding bay behind her was fading. And no fresh sound was replacing it. She was surely collecting her distance. But why was this all happening with the wonderful Coppermine in the race? It was certainly much too easy. It would have been outrageous in her to believe that Roddy's colt belonged to the ruck of the field she seemed to be out-distancing.

She permitted none of this to interfere, however. There was no faltering. No hesitation. Iron Bolt was never so alive and eager. And already she could hear the distant cheers as though the crowd were shouting her colt home.

She pressed on without lifting her whip, and kept her eyes fixed on the vicious corner away below her. And as the thrill of success steadily forced itself upon her something of recklessness supervened. Maybe it was that cheering of an excited mob. At any rate she felt her curiosity must be satisfied. She must look for Coppermine as she made the turn.

Excitement ravished her as Billee bore down on the crucial corner. Every moment those intoxicating shouts were growing louder. They were developing a glorious roar for her triumph. It seemed as if she must be riding home alone. Iron Bolt's class must be sup— But suddenly she found herself listening aghast. It was not Iron Bolt at all.

"Coppermine!"

The name seemed to be shouted at her by a whole frenzied world!

In a moment she realized the thing happening. Coppermine was behind her! Coppermine was coming up! The crowd saw Coppermine winning! Now she could hear that which she had missed while the shouting had absorbed her. It was not the heavy pounding of Charlie Tomlin's bay behind her. She not only heard, but almost felt, the slither of a long, low, gliding gait hard upon her heels. Thoughtless panic leapt. Her gold-headed whip rose and fell in a vicious slash.

It was a fatal yielding. It was at the famous, or infamous, corner which Billee had to take without yielding an inch from the rails. Alas! Billee had neither the physical strength nor the weight to control the result of that slash of her whip. She had fallen for the nerves of it. She had lost her due sense of obligation to her colt. Iron Bolt floundered wide. He ran wide to a distance almost beyond

recovery. And as the girl was carried far into the middle of the course a no longer eager curiosity was satisfied in the tailing flash of an eye. She discovered a gleam of golden chestnut passing the turn hugging close to the rail.

But Billee was not defeated despite the "Coppermine" roar from down the course. Her hot young blood was up. All her courage and self condemnation. She swung Iron Bolt. And she was loyally abetted by the colt. And as the straight lifted ahead of her anxious eyes the great chestnut's golden muzzle was no more than at her knee. She still had half a length of Coppermine.

The struggle was there for her in earnest now. The spectre had materialized itself. Live Oak was riding with hands down as though nothing in the world mattered. So Billee called on the beast under her with a whip that expressed her mood.

"Easy, kid!" It rasped somewhere beyond Billee's shoulder. "He's a swell colt. But you gotta lose your bet to boy Roddy. That's wot I'm here for. I've the legs of you, if you was to kill that poor blame hoss. Listen! 'Fore we get there!"

The sound of it maddened. Live Oak's cool asseveration left Billee wanting to turn her whip on him. But she only retorted without turning her eyes from the broad, rising course ahead.

"Oh, go to glory!" she shrilled back at him. "Ride, man! Ride!"

It was on the instant of it. The chestnut muzzle leapt beyond the iron grey shoulder. And Billee heard a sound at her shoulder which she took to be a chuckle.

"Sure, Billee, gal," Live Oak agreed. "I'm goin' to. But get it good! An' don't go fer to forget! Tell boy Roddy when you get in. Right away. He must pick up Coppermine at 'old man' Smith's. He'll know. He's gotta pay him a bunch of money. I can't stop around. Gotta beat it quick. See? That's all."

It came in hoarse, harsh urgency. And with his last

word Live Oak lifted the savage quirt with which he always rode.

Billee heard. The quirt came down without sparing. And the result told her beyond any peradventure. It left her with a dismal feeling of hopelessness. Coppermine leapt ahead. He was galvanized into a display which left her gallant Iron Bolt as though he were standing still.

Billee fought out the finish desperately. She rode with all that was in her. All that was in the generous creature under her. But nothing lessened the distance between the horses. On the contrary, it widened as the finish came. For the whole length of the gruelling straight Billee was left with a vision of perfect golden quarters and a streaming tail. With the absurd jolting of the twin butts of old-patterned guns protruding from open holsters. With the unedifying spectacle of Live Oak's be-chapped and unattractive back view.

Coppermine went on with the increasing speed of a locomotive gathering way. He cleared the judge's stand lengths ahead of her. And the whole manner of it displayed no more distress than the finish of a morning's exercise gallop.

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Rodney had hurried out to the centre of the course in front of the grandstand as the last horse straggled past the winning post. He was there to acclaim Live Oak on his victory. He was there with Billee's dust coat over his arm to help her from the saddle.

The shouting had fallen. And only the hubbub of excited voices remained. The crowd had started to surge out on to the course. It was streaming down from the tiers of the grandstand and pouring across the great enclosure of it. It was easy to distinguish the victor's supporters. Coppermine's backers were jubilantly derisive at the expense of the dejected faction which had gambled on the colt from the Blacktail Valley.

But Rodney had no heed for the crowd. He was gazing away up the course towards the starting gate. There was a sort of fixed and almost stupid grin on his plain face. There was amazement, too. He was watching the doings of Live Oak who had not pulled up to return after passing the post. Instead he had checked Coppermine to a long easy lope, and was riding on as though intent on making a second circuit of the course.

But the crowd came. And Rodney realized the sort of thing with which he would be confronted. And, seeking escape, he hurried up the course to meet the returning Billee on her jaded Iron Bolt. He reached her just as a dejected Seeds made a hurried appearance to dismount her and relieve her of the colt.

The meeting was characteristically unemotional. There was no greeting. Rodney's grin was lifted to the girl as he reached up and removed her from the saddle like some small child. As her feet touched the hard ground Billee turned to Seeds.

It was a pathetic little grin of humour. And her smile was brave.

"Take him away, Seeds," she directed. "He's a great, big-hearted feller but he hadn't the legs. Look him over and treat him good. It wasn't our day. Coppermine isn't a horse. He's worse than a racing automobile."

She flashed a glance full of sly femininity up at Rodney. And then looked after the drooping colt as Seeds led it away.

"You win, Roddy," she nodded after a moment.

Then her face fell to deadly seriousness as she saw the crowd surging.

"Let's get clear of them," she cried hastily. And her manner was full of urge. "I've a message for you from Live Oak. And I think it means something. Where?"

Rodney helped her into her dust coat without a word. Then in that quick, decided way of his he took possession of one slim arm and hurried her off the course. Billee of-

ferred no protest. She permitted herself to be guided round to the back of the judge's stand.

It was the steward's room under the stand. The door stood open. The room was empty, while the stewards were all up on the stand above awaiting the next race. They passed quickly within. And Rodney closed the door behind them.

For a silent moment the two stood there regarding each other. All Billee's disappointment had passed from the eyes looking up into the man's sober face. There was a queer look of anxiety where before had been dejection. Rodney was thinking only of her. Suddenly his big arms reached. And Billee found herself caught up in them. The man's kisses were hot with passion.

"Yes. I win," he said. "Thanks to Live Oak."

Billee released herself reluctantly.

"Yes," she admitted. "He told me he was going to win for you. But he told me the other, too."

"The message?"

Rodney's eyes had narrowed. All the passion had passed from them. He raised a hand to his forehead and pushed back his loose-brimmed hat.

"Tell me, kid," he said sharply. "It's trouble, eh? Everything's so darn amazing there's got to be trouble somewhere lying around with Live Oak in it."

Billee silently regarded the plain bare room with its table and a few chairs. Finally she moved to the table, and thrusting her hands deep in the pockets of her coat, propped herself upon it.

"You knew, of course. I mean—Coppermine?" she asked with a shrewd unsmiling upward glance.

Rodney shook his head while he wondered at the question.

"Only guessed—in a way. I knew Live Oak had the colt safe from any fire. But I didn't know what happened at that fire. You see—"

"Then it's those two," Billee broke in emphatically.

"Live Oak and—Uncle Benny. Must be. Oh, Roddy, dear, what does it mean? What are those two up to? There's something. Where's Uncle Benny? Has Nick shown up?"

Again came a shake of the man's puzzled head.

"Not a sign of them. But that message? I'm badly guessing."

Billee's trouble was growing.

"No-o," she pondered thoughtfully. Then she gestured. And it was a little helpless movement of her shoulders. "Listen, Roddy," she went on, with a sudden urge. "It was back there where I made a mess of it. When Live Oak took the corner with me floundering wide. He flung it at me in that way of his. He was hot for you to get it like there was something—tough—behind it. His words, the way I remember them: 'Get it good!'" she imitated, "an' don't go to forget! Tell boy Roddy when you get in. Right away! He must pick up Coppermine at "old-man" Smith's. He'll know. He's gotta pay him a bunch of money. I can't stop around. Gotta beat it quick. See? That's all.'"

She was watching the narrowing blue of the man's eyes while she spoke. And something she discovered in the sight of it loosed a string of anxious questions.

"Why has he to 'beat it quick?'" she cried sharply. "Why can't he stop to see Coppermine through? Why can't Live Oak stop to draw all the money he must have won, and—loves? The Valley's burnt out. It doesn't need him. And it doesn't need Benny. Then what does?"

There was a queer swift hardening to Rodney's strong mouth.

"I don't know. But I intend to."

Billee abruptly left her table. She came to him. And she stood close, close. And she dropped her voice to a horrified whisper.

"Roddy!" she cried despairingly. "It's—Nick!"

Rodney regarded the direfully troubled eyes. He nodded.

"Yes," he agreed. "They reckoned it was Nick right along."

The girl's panic leapt. She withdrew her hands from her pockets and there was in them a suggestion of wringing.

"Oh, they've got him. They've got him. My poor, crazy, kid brother. Those two. Our hot-head Benny. Live Oak with his—rope. Oh, Roddy, dear, they mustn't. Don't you see? That's why Benny never got in for the race. That's why Live Oak got in with Coppermine in the last moment. If Nick did it, and they've got him, they'll—kill him!"

Rodney caught the gesturing hands in his. He held them firmly. The sight of Billee's hurt was more than he could endure. He crushed her hands in his to still them.

"Leave it to me, little girl," he said sharply. "Keep your courage. They shan't kill him. I haven't a deal of love for Nick. And if he burnt us out I guess I can hate him good for all he was raised with you. But we aren't killing any firebug, whoever he is. If Live Oak's quitting here in a hurry there's time. Live Oak reckons to be sitting in at any killing. Maybe I know where he'll be making. You beat it along over into the crowd and pick up your father. You two look after Ma till I get back. You can tell them just what you reckon's good for them to know. I'll get right after things. And I'll go pick up Coppermine the way Live Oak said."

There was a vital stirring in the man. He stooped and snatched a swift kiss. Then he turned to go. And Billee's reacting confidence followed him.

"Oh, Roddy, you'll do it!" she cried exultantly. "I know you will! And for me! Don't let them—! Coppermine! Oh, thank God for Coppermine!"

CHAPTER XXI

Son and Father

COPPERMINE SEEMED TO BE torn between appetite and playfulness. He was hungrily attending to a rack of blue-grass hay. Incidentally he was giving snapping attention to the man grooming him. There was positive humour in the way in which the horse was endeavouring to pick him up by his unsavoury nether garments.

The whole thing was an expression of well-being. It gave the impression that if necessary Coppermine was perfectly ready to run the Calford Cup all over again. And even to run for his life.

It was a mean enough barn. Certainly it was unfit for the stabling of a lineal descendant of the famous Kentucky Kid. It might have been appropriate to a hard-bitten, prairie-bred broncho. But not for too long. Its aged wooden flooring was saturated to rottenness with the horse-droppings of years. Its air reeked. Its ventilation was non-existent. Its dilapidation was wholly deplorable. But it was sufficiently spacious. And it was remote enough to suit the devious purposes of Live Oak.

Stringer was at the final stage of the colt's rubbing down. His care of Coppermine had been all he knew how to give. He had rid himself of the unwelcome presence of the detested Abie for the time being, and was now just passing idle moments with a dandy-brush while he mentally contemplated the mass of winnings the animal had earned for him in conjunction with Live Oak.

Live Oak had taken his hurried departure only a few minutes earlier. He had departed leaving behind him a wealth of exact instructions with regard to the horse, and

the collection of their common winnings, for which he had so skilfully and unscrupulously manœuvred. He had flung his saddle on his range horse and ridden off, so far as Stringer was concerned, into the void.

Stringer's dreams of wealth were brought to an abrupt and startled termination. Coppermine abandoned his sporadic attacks on the man's pants and flung up a beautiful head. It was the sound of heavy and rapid footsteps beyond the barn's closed door. And the two stared round at it expectantly.

There was a cheerful admission of broad daylight which passed almost at once as the door was thrust open and shut again. And Stringer found himself grinning across at the unsmiling face of Rodney.

"Live Oak quit?"

It came at once, in a manner of sharp authority that was a little unusual. Stringer's reply was instant, and no less curt.

"Sure, boss."

"When?"

"Jest minutes, I guess. Maybe ten or so."

Rodney considered the big colt that was again busy with its hay-rack. Stringer had posed himself with his dandy-brush laid upon the horse's withers. Rodney's coming had been sooner than he had anticipated. But he had had warning of it from Live Oak. There was, however, something sufficiently unusual in Rodney's manner to intrigue him unfavourably.

Rodney had definite purpose for his attitude. He knew himself to be about to break in on Live Oak's planning. And, as yet, he was not too sure as to the extent to which he might find himself in conflict with it.

"How did he go?"

Stringer's eyes widened at so unnecessary an enquiry.

"Jest saddled his bronch' an' beat it quick," he said, straightening up from his pose.

"Where was he making?"

Stringer broke into a broad grin.

"Search me, boss." There was a gesture with the dandy-brush. "I ast him friendly. He told me diff'rent-like. Sed I need to get to hell an' mind my darn business."

Rodney stepped up to the colt's side. A smile of humour had crept into his eyes. He smoothed Coppermine's glossy quarters which bore never a trace of the race he had so recently run and won.

"Did he say I'd be along?" he asked.

"Said likely." Then Stringer became expansive in his own interests. "Said you'd need me to run the colt over to the Lazy S. barns, seein' us was burnt out. Gussed it would be to-morrow. There's a hell of a dope of stuff I got to collect from the pools to-night."

Rodney nodded.

"Live Oak's won quite a bunch," he agreed.

"Me, too, boss," Stringer corrected sharply.

"Yes. I'd forgotten. You were in with him, fifty-fifty."

"Oh, yeah! Fifty-fifty."

Stringer leered happily. But Rodney turned and passed down the stall, and pointed to an old Mexican saddle sprawled on a pile of unclean stable litter that might well have required months to accumulate.

"You can stop around to collect. But that," he indicated the saddle. "I'll need that. Now, see right here. Get spry. That saddle of yours. Fix the leggadros to fit me. You'll saddle Coppermine right away. Give him a ring snaffle instead of your bit. I'm going across to settle with 'old man' Smith. And you need to have him fixed when I get back. I'm going to run him over Blacktail way myself. You've got ten minutes. No more."

It discouraged argument and objection. But the man essayed both.

"But you can't take him yet, boss!" he protested. "He ain't had a chanct. He ain't had the feed I was going to measure him. Guess—"

"Best measure your own feed," Rodney observed coldly,

as he prepared to depart. "Just get right after things. And you can pack your saddle bags with the feed you guess he ought to have, if it'll ease your mind. You'll make Black-tail when you're through collecting. Get busy. I need him quick."

Ropes stared as Rodney hurried from the barn. He was guessing with all his shrewd might. But he remembered the ten minutes Rodney had told him about.

Benny bestirred under his single blanket. He flung it suddenly from about his hardy body. He was chilled with the cold of the fall night. And he had decided upon a limited activity.

He rose from the deep litter of sun-dried bracken and lank mountain grass which was the only bed he had known for two dreary nights. It was still dark within the crazy shack which also stabled two horses. He groped his way to an open doorway to confront the bleak bitterness of the early dawn.

Benny was fully dressed and without a thought of any ablutions. In fact, at that moment, he had no desire for water in any shape or form. Liquor? Yes. At that dreary hour he would have given half his fortune for a horn of Grant Wilford's "smooth likker." But he was hungry. Ravenously hungry, and unusually clear-headed. As a matter of fact there had been no dawn for years when he had found himself so keen and clear-witted. What with one thing and another he gazed out upon a hushed and shadowed world and gave himself up to a savage hate.

Benny, detached from his home and liquor comforts was rather like a lone and hungry wolf. And, for awhile, leaning against the makeshift, charred upright of the doorway, he enjoyed a mental rending of Live Oak. He felt Live Oak to have decoyed him. He felt like a marooned seaman on a "darn desert island." He felt that the only

joy with which life could ever again provide him would be the heavy and repeated application of the stoutest club he could possibly wield on the exact top of Live Oak's "bughouse" head.

Day was breaking and lightening swiftly. Altitude seemed to show Benny a golden eastern sky long before the night shadows and mists of a lower world had dispersed. And, with the broadening of visibility, he became aware of something else.

It was the charred skeleton of a vast tree of primordial growth. It was there at the edge of what had once been a forest clearing, but which had again yielded to the riot of Nature. Its wide-spreading limbs had been consumed or crashed by the fury of flame which had swept over them some fifteen years before. Their stumps thrust up and out about the parent bole. And from one of them suspended a rawhide rope.

It was noosed into a halter. That grim halter provided for human destruction whose designing was probably contemporary with the spinning of the first rope. The vision of it deflected Benny's hate and he felt better. It left Live Oak to clean up the mess which Benny's mental club had made of him.

Benny left his crazy doorway. The pangs of hunger would no longer be denied. He moved over to the smoulder of camp-fire and dealt with it. He set a couple of small pots on it. Then he gathered replenishment from the litter of charred tree limbs strewn about the clearing in every direction. He re-banked the fire. Finally he stood over it, warming himself, and lit his last remaining cigar.

It was not the island with its lone pine tree which centred the shining waters of the great tarn, and which Jink Woodley had used for the burial of his dead. Benny had decided on the mainland for the execution. It was on the shore of the lake where once young Nick and his outlaw father had shared their home.

The old-time clearing was now clothed with immature

growth, as was the blackened remains of the forest about it. All-mastering Nature had once more proclaimed Herself. The sombre wreckage of the primordial world, that once had been, was again vivid with the cheer of Nature's prodigality.

Benny smoked while the food heated. Then, with care, he extinguished his cigar, saving it against eventualities. Then he ate. And having eaten he prepared a second mess, set it in a large tin pannikin, dipped a pot of boiled tea, and set off with the lot for the lake shore.

In a while a boat moved out toward the central island of omen. And the dip of lumbering sculls broke the morning hush.

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Rodney drew rein. It was a vantage ground where once an outlaw had paused to survey the far distance. But it was all different. Now a dead world was in process of re-birth.

Rodney sat with an elbow supported on the horn of Stringer's saddle. He was weary. It was not the weariness of physical effort. It was the mental wear of a long night of groping through a trackless wilderness of hill and valley, anxious, eager, and weighted with a supreme dread of the consequences of belating.

Rodney would have had no doubts in daylight. But the instinct which belonged to the men of his father's and Live Oak's up-raising was denied him. He had had to fight for direction in the night light every inch of the way.

But Rodney's weariness had failed to communicate itself to the horse under him. It was as though Coppermine had tasted for the first time that freedom of spirit and being in the labyrinth of hill country which is denied in the life of the race-track. It was as though the horse was still demanding more. Its head was flung high. Its nostrils were agush in the chill of the mountain morning air. Its dainty ears were pricked and twitching with eager curiosity. The horse was no less far gazing than the man.

And it was infinitely more ready for what yet remained to be achieved.

The glorious red-gold body was besmirched by disfiguring sweat streams. The precious limbs were mired far above knee and hock. But spirit was still a-riot in a strong heart pulsing within a massive girth.

As Coppermine had raced to win the laughing wager of a boy and girl so he was still ready and eager to run for the salving of a man's unworthy life.

Rodney sat up with stirring pulses. The reward of his long night of effort was there ahead. And near. So near. There could be no mistaking the flashing gleam of the rising sun's reflection on those wide shining waters. There could be no missing of that great lone pine rearing its mournful crest in the very centre of them. It was the old homing ground of the outlaw father of young Nick. And the certain execution ground which the ruthless Live Oak would have selected for his victim.

The eager Coppermine scarcely waited for the lifting of any rein.

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Rodney's face was curiously a-grin as his eyes surveyed the skilfully plaited rawhide rope swaying in the lightness of the morning breeze. He knew it on sight. He would have known it anywhere. It was Live Oak's. That symbol of the traffic of the cattleman's life. And without which Live Oak would have been well-nigh unrecognisable.

Rodney's grin was an expression of relief which would find no words to tell of it. He considered the torn and charred limb of the blackened tree from which the rope was suspended. He noted the height of the noose from the ground. And he saw that the rope's other end was secured. He glanced about the space which had once been a clearing. And, quite suddenly, he stood listening with an eye slanted at a crazy grass-roofed shack with a campfire lit before its blackened doorway.

But it was only for a moment. He turned to the horse, whose reins were linked over his arms and loosed the cinches of Stringer's old saddle. Then, his task completed, he turned again in response to the sound of rapidly approaching footsteps. Coppermine was left to his cheerful survey of his new surroundings.

"Too bad I've butted in on the party, sir," Rodney said, his lips quirking derisively, and his glance turned on the swinging rope, as his father's square body came hurriedly towards him from the lake shore. "Looks like Coppermine hasn't won only the Cup race."

He shook his head contentedly.

"I guess Live Oak had the lead of a half hour or so. But even off the race-track, and amongst these hills and things, there's about only one Coppermine. Well, I'm glad."

There was a tone in it all. And none of it was lost on the father's swift up-take. But Benny was concerned in a different direction. He was staring half angrily, half incredulously at the mired and sweat stained body of the great horse that was now contentedly searching for feed about the roots of the lank, tufted mountain grass that was sparsely carpetting that which once had been hard-trodden ground.

"For God A'mighty's sake!" he exploded hotly. "You, Roddy, with your darn great body, rode that poor blame colt up through the hills, after—after—"

"Sure, Benny." Rodney beamed good-humouredly. "Guess I'd have ridden him to hell and back so I wouldn't see a swell father get to be a—murderer. You see, sir, I'm kind of proud of my father. And my mother's not only proud of the man who helped her to make it so I could get a peek around a mighty pleasant world. Besides, I'm crazy to go on putting over an enterprise that's to show you two the stuff so you'll both keep on eating right. And I don't guess I'd be glad to do that for any—murderer. Maybe Coppermine understood, too. That's why he just

got to it to win a second race. I allow it was a tough proposition with Live Oak in the race. Still—" There was a shrug of big shoulders,—“he’s put it over the same as the other.”

Benny stood squarely in front of the youth who towered over him so mightily. His impish dark eyes were slanted up at a grinning face that was full of quiet resolve and plainness. There was a consuming fire burning in their depths which told of battle to be joined.

“You can go to that hell you said about, and mind your darn business, Roddy,” came the instant violent retort.

“That’s how Live Oak told Stringer when he asked him where he was making. But I am minding my darn business, Benny. And I’m going to put it over. You’ve just come off that lake where you’ve likely got my Billee’s foster-brother tied up till Live Oak helps you use that on him.”

Rodney nodded at the swaying rope.

“It’s a swell—gibbet,” he went on. “That’s how they called it away back in those days when folks didn’t know better. But you could find a better use for rawhide if I know you, Benny. You see, you’re a cattleman. And you’re not a—murderer.”

“Tcha!”

It snarled. Benny’s teeth seemed to bare like those of a wolf. His dark face had become still darker. Impulsive violence was a-riot.

“You’re talking like an unkissed schoolma’am,” he roared on explosively. “You haven’t seen it! The Valley! God in Heaven! There’s not a living thing left to it but what you’ll find swimming in the creek. It’s him! The same as all those other fires. We found him there after he’d drenched the trees with kerosene and lit it. He was there, stark crazy, lookin’ on while our home went down to the ashes of hell’s fire.”

Benny flung out a pointing hand at the grazing horse.

"It was to get him. To cheat you. Because he was crazy enough to think you and Billee meant your bet. Because he had to get money to save his own skin whole. He's got to get it! He's goin' to get it! Firebug! Crook! Murderer? Sure. He meant burning your great horse, that's worth a hundred skunks like him, to death. That breed's going to get clean justice. Not murder. That rope's waiting on him. And it's going to choke the miserable life out of the blame cur!"

Rodney's grin had faded out. He considered the square figure of the man whom he loved the more for his violence and devastating wrath. And as his eyes came to rest on the gun holsters that were strapped to his father's thighs he understood the more surely all that latent savagery with which he must contend.

"Maybe the way you see justice, father," he said without levity, "isn't the same the world sees—"

But he broke off, listening. Benny had turned to the golden light of the eastern sky.

It was the rapid beat of horse's hoofs. And both of them knew on the instant.

Live Oak's range horse broke, hard-driven, into the clearing. It came in from the southeast so that the cattle-man saw it all. His queerly rolling eyes missed nothing. He flashed one swift glance at the mighty frame of Rodney where it stood in the shadow of Benny's improvised gallows. He beheld the aggressively poised figure of the angry father. He had a vision of golden chestnut, complacently grubbing for feed, and forgot the others. He stared at it.

The moments flashed by. Then Live Oak vaulted out of the saddle. Without a word of comment or greeting he removed his saddle from his horse's back, and watched the beast roll. Then he hurried across to the silent men and stood himself at Benny's side. It was the gesture of a man choosing his side for the battle he knows has yet to be fought out.

Rodney had watched, understood, and had remained

quite undismayed. He considered the two creatures whom he regarded so warmly, and noted the obtruding guns of both. He smiled in his most friendly fashion. But he spoke to Live Oak.

"I've been telling Benny," he said. "It's Coppermine. He's put over the biggest race of his life, seeing you were riding in it. It was a race to keep my father's hands clean. He won it. Coppermine won the way you'd always have him win."

There was no narrowing to Rodney's eyes now. They were widely smiling. And the blue of them held Live Oak's steady.

As Live Oak remained silent Rodney went on with a jerk of his head in the direction of the rawhide rope, still restlessly swaying in the morning breeze.

"Guess there's not a deal of need for any rawhide now," he said. "The cattle days are over. And there's going to be no hanging. I want the loan of your sheath knife, Live Oak."

There was quiet appeal in it rather than request or command.

Live Oak was gazing squarely. There was no question. No pretence. He moved his death's-head negatively. And the breeze tilted the brim of his hat as he did so.

"No!" he said. And his jaws continued a mastication from which they never seemed to rest.

"No?"

It echoed without heat. Without even coldness. It was accompanied by the friendliest smile.

"It's a pity," Rodney went on. "It'll take me longer unfixing Benny's lashing. You see, I'm going to take it down and burn it so you shan't make—murderers—of the best men I know. If you don't want me to do it there's only one thing left to you both. Those guns of yours. I'm quite unarmed. Well?"

There were long moments of warring wills. Moments when passions were burning at furnace heat. The cattle-

man's face was even more lividly a death's-head. Benny's hot eyes were coals of fire as they eyed the immensity of his son.

Eventually it was the father's will that weakened under the force of it all.

"Hell!" It broke violently.

"Pass it, Live Oak!" Benny ordered savagely. "Pass the darn kid the knife. Maybe he'll pick his milk teeth with it—after."

For a moment there was refusal in the cattleman's immobility. There was murder, too, in those queer white-ringed eyes. Then, compelled against his will, a hand went round to the back of his right hip. A moment later a long, gleaming knife was held out hilt first.

But no word accompanied the gesture.

Rodney took the knife while he steadily regarded the passion-livid features of the man offering it. Then he moved swiftly. He slashed the knots securing the rope to the tree trunk. He pulled the rawhide from its suspending limb.

But that was not the finish. Quite deliberately Rodney gathered up the rope and cut it into short lengths. Then slowly and deliberately he fed each length of it to Benny's well-banked fire, and watched the hide of them curl up and char.

It was the last piece. And Rodney gazed at it meditatively. After a moment he slanted an eye that was alight with friendly humour. It caught his father's regard.

"They're done, sir," he smiled. "The old cattle days. We're just 'honest-to-God' moss-backs now. Will you help me bury them? The tough old days?"

He held out the last of the rope. But Benny flashed instant spurning.

"Not on your life, boy," he cried, while his eyes shone with no less humour. "An' maybe when you make back along from Europe you'll tell us about those old days again."

Rodney dropped the last of the rope into the fire and watched its demolishing thoughtfully. Then he turned to Live Oak and handed back the knife.

"Thanks, old friend," he said quietly, while the cattle-man returned the vicious weapon to its sheath. "You've done me a kindness I shan't forget as long as I live. Now I'm going along over to that island. And I give you my sacred word if that poor darn son of a killer father needs more punishment than he's got already he shall get it."

CHAPTER XXII

Damned!

THE DREARY FOLIAGE MOURNED

sadly above Rodney's head. Aged and wind-torn, drooping as though with the burden of its years, the vasty giant was a dejected picture of progressive decay. Rodney regarded its patriarchal immensity with contemplative eyes, and presently turned them to the things about him of more personal concern. There was the low-built deadhouse of heavy logs and stout door just beyond. And the vision of it found marvel in him at the mentality which had conceived its erection.

Rodney was on the ascent of the island's steeply inclined shore.

His purpose was clear in a mind that was coldly unrelenting. Nevertheless, he knew a distaste for the task he had assumed that almost amounted to revolting. He felt that the whole thing had devolved upon him through a force of circumstances that was more than unfair. He was bitterly biased. He knew himself to be consumed by a hatred that had neither mercy, charity, nor even honesty. Yet he must salve a life he would gladly enough see sacrificed. Rodney was incapable of deceiving himself.

But he recognised the necessity and even justice in that salving. Billee desired it. Benny was involved. Benny, his father. And his childhood's friend, Live Oak. Then he knew that young Nick Woodley's crimes against them were not of the man's own free and sane will.

Nick, to him, was a pathetic victim of the wanton evil of indiscriminate parenthood. Nick had been born to disaster. And the hideous circumstances of his childhood's life had deranged an untutored mind. Nick was the help-

less fruit of a criminal father's passions. And, he had been damned from the moment life had leapt in his mother's womb.

Rodney came to the split log door of the deadhouse to find it unlocked, unbarred. The discovery warned him what to expect. So, with a resigned hunch to his shoulders, he thrust it open, and passed within.

It was even more ugly than warning had anticipated. Nick's young body was huddled in its tawdry disguise of Indian buckskin. He was prisoned mercilessly against every possible chance of escape.

The wide flung door lightened the windowless darkness within. And Rodney beheld the lifeless huddle crouched on the cold earth of an elongated mound. Nick was secured by the neck like any dog. But he was collared to a roof post in a manner more ruthless than any to which a dog would have been called upon to submit.

The hut was bare of everything it had once contained of stores. It sheltered now only the mound of a woman's grave, the seemingly half-dead youth, and the empty pan-nikin from which he had presumably eaten.

Rodney voicelessly blasphemed the savage hate it all pointed.

There was no stirring at Rodney's entrance. No movement of any sort. Nick looked to be beyond all hope. All interest. But Rodney was in no way deceived. Life was there. Full life that was yielding to no more than physical and mental torture.

Rodney looked at the bonds which were cunningly knotted to the post clear above the prisoner's reach. There were other knottings about the post at the neck level. These, however, would not yield any release. Only the rope ends so high above. He moved at once and attacked the knots at the rope's ends.

He released them. Then he released the lower knots, holding the rope loosely but securely fastened about Nick's neck. And reaction was instant.

Nick keeled over in a helpless sprawl with a groan of moaning relief.

Rodney stood up. He gazed at the helpless sprawl of it. If he knew pity there was no expression of it. But he dropped quickly to his knees. And he groped a hip pocket for the flask of liquor he had obtained for his own comfort from "old-man" Smith.

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Nick was sitting up with warm life returned to his eyes. His back was to the roof post which had held him bonded. His buckskin clad legs were parted astride of the mound of his mother's grave. And he had a lively, upward gaze that was full of question.

Rodney was leaning. His body was at the second roof post which footed the grave. He was there standing between the seated Nick and the freedom beyond the wide open door.

It was all a grim expression of the thinness of the veneer which translates the human savage. Both had youth and modern culture. Both hated to the point of murder. Both had no thought or care for the dead bones of the woman buried there between them.

The liquor which "old-man" Smith had provided had done its work. Nick was never more alive, alert. It was no cattleman confronting him now. And he knew a feeling that the turn of Fortune's wheel was something in his favour. He hated. And he knew the man gazing down at him hated. Nevertheless a glimmer of hope refused to extinguish.

Rodney jerked his head at the door standing wide open behind him.

"They're both out there," he said coldly. "Life and death. You can have which you choose. But neither 'll be as easy as maybe you'd fancy. Death is the rope. The sort of devil you may understand about. The other's a different sort of devil we can't even guess at. You'll make a choice

and abide by it. That's what I'm here for. You'll make it when you've heard what I've got to say. Live Oak and Benny. They're both out there—waiting."

There was a cold steadiness and terseness in it that should have warned. Perhaps it did warn. But Nick's mentality was still warm with liquor.

"What's the game, Roddy?" he asked sharply, suspiciously. "Why? How? They were to hang me. Benny's just fed me like he was fattening some miserable cockerell before he pulled its neck. He's plumb crazed for a dope of cold murder. Waiting for Live Oak to put over the job. Why the choice you're talking? No guts?"

Rodney produced a pipe and packed it thoughtfully. He estimated the manner of it at its true value. When the pipe was filled he set it between his jaws and groped his jacket pocket.

He produced them. It was a package of cigarettes he had collected with the liquor from "old-man" Smith. It was a folder of matches, too. He tore off a match and lit his pipe. Then he pitched the cigarettes and folder within Nick's reach.

Nick found the gesture a little staggering, a little incredible. But he reached out at once. He seized the coveted cigarettes like some starving creature ravening for unexpected food. He almost tore the packet open. He lit a cigarette without a word of thanks and inhaled ecstatically. And as he did so the widely open door had a new meaning for him.

Rodney's reply came as he blew his first smoke.

"That's mostly a fool question," he said. "You know Benny. You know Live Oak. There's no scare around this dump but that I saw tied to that darn post when I opened this door."

He shrugged.

"But you're entitled to the 'Why?' And to the 'How?' I intended to tell you both, anyhow. Fix your mind on what I tell you. And forget that door you're yearning to

pass out of. First, I'll tell you things you need to know."

Nick leant back against the post without concern for that which it had meant to him before. But the warmth of life in him had become less pronounced. Rodney's tone had something in it that flung him back on resources which had already failed him in his two unending nights of black darkness in his mother's deadhouse.

"You mean the—Cup?" he said, with a vaunting attempt at contempt in the gesture of his cigarette.

"And its result to you."

Rodney removed his pipe.

"Iron Bolt lost to me because Live Oak and others around Blacktail knew you'd been firing the forests ever since you came back from college. Live Oak guessed you'd fire our valley when it suited you. To put us out of the business of the Cup. Coppermine wasn't within miles of your foolish fire. He hadn't been in his stable any night since the harvest. When you fired our woods there wasn't a single life, animal or human, in our valley. It was just useless destruction. So I won the Cup from your horse. And I won all that was attached to the race for Billee and me. We're going to be married in a couple of days."

The effect was almost devastating. Nick seemed to shrink under his beaded buckskin. All the life which liquor had restored to him seemed to snuff out of his Indian-black eyes like a passing candle flame. He crouched down, breathing smoke furiously. He uttered not a single word.

Rodney went on without mercy.

"The stuff that concerns you alone I guess you don't need telling," he said. "But I'm going to tell it. You're in the hands of a bunch of sharps who'll show you no mercy. They knew you meant to stop Coppermine. How much they knew of your intent to fire our valley I'm not concerned with. But you've let them down. Besides that you owe them what you can't pay. What you can never pay now. You haven't a hope of clearing yourself. And they'll hound you to hell for it."

Rodney watched the least variation of expression in the good-looking face under its smear of Indian staining. There had been the leap of hate when he had mentioned his marriage. But now there was nothing but hopeless panic at his reminder of those who would be waiting for him. Bleak hopelessness looked back at him as he went on.

"The 'why' of it needs little explanation," he said quietly. "I guess insanity is misfortune. Sickness rather than crime. You're a quarterbreed. You're the son of a 'killer' father and God alone knows what sort of mother. At any rate your father's was the sort of evil you could never hope to escape. And when you were little more than a babe the fire that burnt your world out here got into the back of your mind. It passed you the craziness that started in to drive you when you came back from college, and found yourself roaming our forests—alone."

Rodney shook his head.

"I've no use for you anyway," he said with a harsh, cold spurning. "But you've never had a chance. You were damned by your origin from the start. For the foulness you've done to us in our valley you deserve the rope. But because of these things you're to get helped."

"How?"

It was a whisper of startled hope. It contained nothing else.

"Those sharps will be paid so they can't claim you." Rodney shrugged.

"Who?"

Again that urgent whisper. Nick was leaning forward, Rodney saw. It was the look of a drowning man, watching, watching, and wondering if the rescue will fail him. Rodney dismissed the question and went on.

"You'll quit Calford and these hills. There's the War in Europe. And it may exterminate you amongst the thousands already being exterminated. But, anyway, you won't ever get back here till it's made you a sane and right man.

I'm going along over there at the end of the month. You'll have to go, too. That's your alternative to Live Oak's rope. There'll be no double-crossing. Attempt it, and you'll go down for arson. It's a five year stretch. That's the 'how' of it. Do you want to say anything?"

Rodney looked for reaction. It might be violent. Or it might not. But that which occurred was the last thing he looked for.

There was a little futile gesture of two helpless hands. There was the nervous flinging of a cigarette stump. And the lighting of a fresh cigarette. There was hopelessness in the fine black eyes. And a sigh of utter weariness as the man inhaled smoke.

"Damned! Yes! God! And it's hell!"

It was from the depths of a soul distraught. It was no pretence. It was no self-pity. It was a low-voiced whisper thrilling with self-horror.

Nick's knees drew up. His hands clasped them. And his cigarette burnt a thin spiral of smoke that rose before despairing eyes. He brooded on in a sort of low-voiced, almost child-like soliloquy.

"I never said when they found me. I was mostly dead anyway. But I wouldn't have. You see, when that Doctor Sharp got me alive a sort of cunning got me and told me not to. It was back of my mind, like you said. And it stopped there. It never quit me. It never let me forget it."

He breathed heavily.

"It was those wolves. A bunch of them," the low voice went on. "I can see them now. Here. Eyes, ears, and guts you could well nigh see clear through. I flung at them. Went after them with fire sticks. And I forgot the forest underlay. When it came I was near home. It roared down the gorge like thunder. Hell's flame and smoke loosed. It lit up the whole world. And I was scared crazy. Then Jink came and I told him. He never blamed. Just set me safe here on this island and went back to salvage our truck. God! That was all. I never saw him again."

Another deep breath and the voice went on.

"But someway I didn't seem to mind a great lot about anything while I could watch it. It was all around. The fire. The lake was ringed by it, it seemed to me. And the sight set me plumb crazed with the wonderfulness of it."

He ceased his monotone and sucked his cigarette. Then, with a gesture, he spoke more loudly, more harshly.

"It's never left me since," he cried. "That fire. It's in my head. Always there. I see it at nights. I dream it. And when I'm out in the woods I'm longing, crazy longing, to see it real again. I guess I'll never see woods but I got to fire them. You don't know. Psha! No one knows. They can't. How could anyone understand? It's hell! Hell's damnation! And I'll have to stay damned as long as I live."

Suddenly he released his up-drawn knees. His head lifted. There was question in his upward slanted eyes. There was a world of appeal. He was holding his cigarette poised in mid-air.

"Choose? I've got to choose? I'm not crazy, except about those fires, Roddy. Sure I'll choose. It's Europe. If it's extermination it's better than Live Oak's rope. And I'll be glad for it anyway. You see, my head's still full of those hell's fires. And you've got all I ever wanted out of life. There'll be no double-cross. That's all."

Rodney found himself thrilling with a pity for this man such as he had never thought to know. He was realizing something of the purgatory which Nick was enduring in his defencelessness against his obsession. As Nick set his cigarette back into his mouth with a nervous gesture he nodded down at him. And he pointed the mound between them with the stem of his pipe.

"That's your mother—down there," he said, while Nick stared wonderingly. "Will you take an oath on her dead bones? The bones that gave you life? You make across to Europe with me. And you stay to the finish—whatever it is?"

Nick looked down at the mound. Then, slowly, he shook his dark head.

"Why her?" he asked. "If you want it that way I guess you can have it. But—I get my dirt from her and Jink. But there's someone I never got dirt from. Only cleanliness. And good. And the sort of help I hadn't a right to. The girl I love a heap better than the life you're trying to hand back to me. Billee!"

There was no evasion in the eyes gazing up. There was just a frankness that was without even hate. Rodney straightened up from his leaning. In that moment he was glad of the circumstances that had forced his task upon him.

"This is a foul deathhouse," he said, blowing heavy smoke. "It's unclean, unwholesome. We'll get outside where there's clean air, and light, and—life."

CHAPTER XXIII

The Common Sacrifice

FOR CALFORD THE AMAZING events of the Cup race was less than a nine days wonder in the sudden gloomy development of its war consciousness. Almost before Coppermine's astounding victory had been fully digested the real pall of war fog fell upon the city. No thunder could have crashed more violently than did the startling news that devastated the community. Wheat futures had tumbled. Prices had fallen headlong on disastrous war news. And the grain market would remain closed against panic selling.

It was a tragic war reaction. There had been the garnering of a bountiful harvest with its promise of ease and plenty. There had been all the joy and excitement of the Calford Cup week. There had been the pleasant looking forward to the long ease and mild gaieties of the coming winter. Now—?

Coppermine's dramatic winning of the Cup was forgotten almost in a twinkling.

So, in the anxiety of this late development, wherein a remote industry was called upon to yield its quota to the common sacrifice, Calford learned not a word of the truth of the firing of Benny Hyles' famous Valley Deep. And, anyway, Calford had lost all interest in it. Then it knew nothing of Coppermine's subsequent race to the hills. Or of the little human drama it involved. A conspiracy of silence concealed the whole thing. And all that was ever heard was that which a few mischievous tongues, and the malignance of those who had made Iron Bolt their gamble, chose to spread abroad.

The party from the Blacktail Valley had faded out of the city; had faded away from the scene of the race.

It was immediately after Iron Bolt's defeat that Billee had made her appeal for an exodus home. Grant Wilford had been glad enough of it, and refrained from any form of question. Sarah Hyles had never been more eager to return where she might look to discover her absent man. She had been so eager that she was even prepared to trust herself to Billee's reckless driving of Rodney's automobile.

So they reached the great homestead of the Lazy S. while the last race of a long and cheerful programme was still being run.

Billee had driven with reckless fury over roads ungraded for such speed. But she knew her freight. It knew nothing of nerves. And its anxiety to obtain the last detail of ill-omened tidings was as great as her own.

Even in the common worry of it all the conspiracy of silence maintained in Calford remained more or less intact as the automobile sped on its return to the valley. Billee knew that which she had no desire to discuss with anybody. Her silent father knew what his clear, shrewd mind told him. And he saw no reason to impart it. Sarah was simply heart-stricken and anxious. And in her strong self-reliance had no desire to share her troubles till the worst had become known.

Billee's evening was spent in making the necessary preparations for sheltering their friends. Her father went down to the barns on an errand of a similar nature. Until they knew the full extent of Benny's disaster the Lazy S. must be made ready for salvage.

It was a long and burdensome evening. And for Billee and Sarah it was followed by a long and wakeful night. Then came the morrow's daylight without bringing any relief.

It nevertheless brought Seeds and others back from Calford. It brought Iron Bolt. And with that return Grant and Billee set out for Benny's valley to discover any hope there might be for the anxious Sarah. They returned at

mid-day from the still smoking ruins of a flourishing enterprise without having achieved more than witness to complete disaster.

Their news was broken to an indomitable Sarah who remained unflinching before the vivid picture of devastation presented to her. Her only interruption was to question Benny. When told that no living creature and no sign of disaster to any life had been discovered her comment was characteristic of her loyalty and courage.

"It's just as I thought, Gran," she smiled up into the calm grey eyes that had so little softening. "Benny was never the sort to anticipate. If fire is his ultimate destiny it won't be of earthly origin. Benny will show himself in his own good time. And when Benny shows up to take hold of things I fully expect to discover our vanished Live Oak. I feel a lot easier. And I'll be a deal easier still when I know what mischief that son of mine is up to as well."

It was comment that had immense appeal, and Grant Wilford rumbled his appreciation of it.

"Sure, Sarah," he chuckled. "But I'm not reckoning a deal on that ultimate destiny either. Benny's got the sort of quick intellect that's not likely to fall for any darn weapon that dates as far back as a Satanic pitchfork. Guess I can't see Benny gettin' singed anywhere."

Grant spent the day in his Sunday suit making the rounds of his homestead and maintaining a silence that had once more become impenetrable. Billee and Aunt Sarah spent the day in company, each clinging to their own hopes and fears. Then followed a second night which proved no more restful than the first.

It was about two hours before the dawn when the sound of it reached Billee, who was wide awake and ready for the least emergency. If Sarah heard it she gave no sign. The big Grant was not the sort to permit anything to disturb a full night of profound slumber.

But Billee was on her feet in an instant. It was the sound of hoofs. And it came from that which she deemed

to be the right direction. Clad in no more than the dainty silk of her nightwear she craned from her wide open window peering far in the dim light of an inefficient moon. It was only for a few brief moments though. Then, with thrilling haste, she was transferring her slim body from the softness of diaphanous silken folds to the less gracious shelter of cord breeches and boots.

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Billee's dressing was accomplished at record speed. She was concerned for no more than three garments. They were garments which had been set ready for just that particular emergency. She slid like a slim eel into breeches and boots. And the red-gold of her head was plunged into, and emerged through a thick, warm, white woollen pull-over which would sufficiently protect her young body against the chill night air.

She reached the southern porch before the source of the hoof-beats had revealed itself. And she peered searchingly into the night.

The sound went on and it was nearer and louder. Whoever the rider was he was heading straight for the home-stead. Then, too, Billee had confirmation of her first impression. She was confident now that the first echoes of those speeding hoofs had sounded somewhere in the wooded gorge which was the highway to Nick's far hunting grounds in the heart of the hills.

She knew a great thrill of hope. Excitement surged. And the girl argued out of her ardent desires. If it were Rodney returning he would make straight for the horse boxes of the stud farm enclosure. Coppermine would have to be housed. That would mean bedding, and the hurried preparation of a spare loose-box. She would be needed. In fact—

Argument shut off abruptly. The horse and rider flashed into view in the uncertain night light. It was a big horse-man, and a big horse. But they were vague, shadowy, and

wholly indeterminate. Billee watched them loom out of the shadows. She watched them progress across her outlook. Then she saw them vanish, swallowed up by the obscurity beyond the farm buildings below her.

There was no hesitation now. No pause for further consideration. Billee was off the porch at a leap like any young hare. She reached the ground and ran. She, too, became a ghost in the night. A white-clad, running spectre flitting from shadow to shadow amongst the farm buildings as the uncertain moonlight revealed her.

A little breathlessly Billee came to the stable yard. She found the gates flung wide open. And she understood. But even so she paused to peer in beyond the opening. And she beheld. It was Rodney and Coppermine.

She wanted to laugh in her joy and relief. There could be no mistaking the big lean body of Roddy as he lifted the horned saddle and blanket from the clean back of the red-gold beauty which had smashed its victorious way over race-track and trackless hills and valleys, to reach and possess her heart.

There was a little glad cry which startled the man to make him turn. There was the scurry of dainty feet over the sun-baked soil of the enclosure. There was a deep-voiced responsive ejaculation as the saddle and blanket were flung to the ground. A moment, and two great arms were hugging.

"Billee!"

It lasted only a few brief moments while Billee knew her lover's kisses. Then the girl released herself. She stood back. And her face shone up at him in the moonlight as she flung disjointed questions.

"Have you—? Is he—? Oh, Roddy boy, I'm so—so thankful you're safe back and— Tell me? Did you—?"

It was all chaotic, hopelessly incoherent. But then Billee felt incoherent and almost unreal. She was beside herself with relief in Rodney's simple presence.

Reply came in an understanding and reassuring nod in

the moonlight. All that a man could affirm to her was in a characteristic phrase.

"Sure, kid."

• • • • •

It was inside a spacious loose box lit by two large-framed hurricane lanterns collected from the lamp room. The box was deeply bedded with clean straw from the new harvest. A wide top rack was filled with new hay. Coppermine was feeding it with that glorious greed which gladdens a horse-lover's heart. Billee and Rodney were both silently at work.

It was a luxurious home for the fine drawn beast, whose flanks were tuckered, and whose sleek beauty was besmirched by a dried sweat saturation and mire. It was more fitting than the sink in which Coppermine had been housed in "old-man" Smith's insanitary and unsavoury stables. But Coppermine, in hungry but angelic mood, seemed wholly indifferent.

Rodney was driving his dandy-brush through the grey sweat stains, and the caked mud that was thick under the horse's belly. Billee, on the other side of the horse, was plying brush and currycomb with all the joyous will in the world. It was a spectacle of supreme devotion. It was a sight to gladden the eyes of the gods of equine creation.

For a voiceless half hour the work went on under the lantern light. Dust filled the air and kept both girl and man blowing to keep it from their throats. And while the tuckered, red-gold vision of shapeliness emerged from under disfiguring grey, Coppermine just ate, and continued to eat, and did not seem to care very much what happened to the rest of him.

Billee had changed over to a chamois-leather rubber while Rodney turned on the water cock over the drinking trough installed beside the corn manger. He filled it. And Coppermine drank with the sincerity of any drunkard. Then, after noisy moments, the velvet muzzle was with-

drawn again to its hay, and Rodney ran off the rest of the water.

Billee went to a locked corn bin and returned with a measured feed. This caring for Coppermine filled her with supreme happiness. She emptied it into the iron manger, and watched the ravening fashion in which the horse went for it open-mouthed. For a few silent moments she watched smilingly. Then of a sudden she turned to the man beside her.

"Tell me, Roddy, dear," she ordered, and laid a caressing hand on golden withers which required her reaching almost tip-toe.

Billee waited eagerly with all her anxiety returned. She was gazing up at her lover's serious face, watching and trying to read its every expression. She saw the vivid blue of his eyes regard the gleaming burnish of the horse's coat. And she watched the little movement of doubt in the shake of his head.

"Do I, Billee?" he asked simply.

There was that in it which the girl read unerringly. It was reluctance. And her heart sank below zero.

"Just what you think best, Roddy," she said in a low submission that was without hope.

And Rodney smiled round and down at her.

"Bully!" he ejaculated happily. "You're a great kid. There's stuff I'd like to spare you. But," he added with a prideful nod at his still feeding horse, "he won his second race."

"Oh, Roddy, darling, you got there—in time? You found them—him? Nick? Is he—?"

"All of it, Billee." A great arm and an unclean hand circled over the girl's white, woolly shoulders and held them tight. "Nick's away over at the Valley with Benny and Live Oak now. They're getting all the live stock together that Benny and Live Oak corralled in safety three miles away down the Valley before the fire. They're going

to run them along over here at sun up. Nick's going across to France with—me."

It was quiet, unsmiling. Billee stared up at the strong plain face and drew a sharp little breath that was like a catch in her throat.

"And—and the money he owes?"

"It will be paid. The last dollar of it. Before he goes."

"Oh boy, boy!"

Billee released herself from the encircling arm and her two slim hands wrung themselves in a queer gesture of distress and happiness which caused Coppermine to look round in mild enquiry.

"You've done it—for me. You've—you've gone against your father, Benny! Live Oak! You've saved Nick after all he's hurt you. For me! Roddy!—I can't forget it ever. As long as I've a breath in my foolish body. My worries! That's how you laughed and said."

Rodney's eyes grinned a gentle humour.

"And why not, Billee. They're mine, too. You see you belong, don't you? That's the way it'll be fixed in Calford day after to-morrow—by the registrar."

Billee's hands hung dolefully supporting the corn measure. Her mouth was drooping. Her eyes were frowning tearfully.

"Oh, Roddy! But must you go over to France?"

"Sure. Or I won't be able to come back to you."

"But—"

Billee's further protest remained unspoken. Rodney's arms reached and closed about her slim body.

"That's all right, little girl," he chuckled, as he looked down into her up-raised eyes. "No squeal! No worries! There's nothing going to stop me getting along back to you."

Coppermine suddenly imposed himself. His mild eyes were full of an expression which he alone could understand. Maybe he was observing interestedly. Maybe he

was asking for more oats. Rodney saw the beautiful head turned regarding. And he laughed.

"Can you beat it. Look, Billee. Look at that priceless cayuse. I believe he understands. He's grubbed the last of his oats. And now he's taking notice. God! That feller! He can run. The higher and rougher the hill the better he seems to like it. They're right. Those two darn cattlemen. Benny and Live Oak. Machinery's hell! We'll have to use him and Iron Bolt Tuesday to make Calford. How's that?"

Billee's eyes shone wide with delight in the lantern light.

"Oh, Roddy!" she cried. "And may I ride the lovely thing?"

Rodney kissed and held her.

"That goes, girlie. He's yours—for keeps."

• • • • •

Benny sat round very square and squat, in his heavy pea-jacket which was buttoned close against the chill of the fall night. He regarded the three brown bottles, the water pitcher and glasses on the table between them, with cordial friendliness. Grant Wilford's big body was contemplatively rocking in his capacious chair. He, too, was buttoned against the keen of the night.

The old imp was back in Benny's eyes. It was the sight of generous "likker" which had restored his mood for the moment. He chuckled. And he gestured expressively.

"Seems like it must be an act of old Prov, Gran," he said. "You being around right now with your notions of smooth likker, and the key of Hester's dandy cellars. But it's that darn up-take of yours. Never knew you to get beat by circumstance. Now who'd have gussed me and Sarah to be using you like a boarding house. Well, say, I'm not worrying a thing."

"No."

Grant pushed an uncorked bottle adjacent to Benny's

practised reach and he watched the smile fade out of his friend's eyes.

"You know, Gran, I'm all het up," Benny went on, his hot eyes suddenly frowning as he measured the full breadth of his hand into his glass, and forgot the water pitcher. "I've tried to grab a youngster's viewpoint. But I ask you. How the hell? Roddy's a kid. An' like all kids he thinks with those guts of his. I got a bunch of life back of me and need to think with my head. The big worry with kids is they get all hotted and act. They don't never figger consequences till they wouldn't know one of 'em from a death sentence. Look at the things those two are doing now. Him going right off to France. And Billee letting him. When there ain't no need but his notion. Then to-morrow. Riding those two darn horses in to Calford to get fixed up together without a right passon. Another week and Billee 'll be back home along here. And Roddy 'll be making a darn soldier of himself for folks to shoot at. There ain't darn sense to any of it. Just guts. That's all. Sheer guts. That's those two. Red hot under their cool ways. And just as full of foolishness as these right bottles are of alcohol. I get tired."

Benny drained his glass and set it on the table with a bang of deep feeling and sheer pride.

"Crazy! That's all," he went on. "I don't say a thing to that quarterbreed Nick of yours going over there. It's—diff'rent. But those two! It ain't a thing but darn fool patriotics. With you an' me setting around like a couple boobs watching 'em act foolish. War's hell!"

"Sure."

Grant removed a pipe that interfered with efficient drinking. Benny splashed liquor into his empty glass with some violence.

"What's the use," he grumbled on. "Maybe it's that 'common sacrifice' the newssheets are hooting about. Sacrifice? Well, this darn war's killed the grain market. And it looks like killing the lives of half the boys in the whole

blamed world. Say, Gran, I'd give a bunch to have the man-handling of the political bosses who start up these wars. Common sacrifice!" he snorted. "Sure! So darn common I'd string the lot with rawhide! Just leave me and Live Oak loose around the political barn yard, and—"

He broke off in a gust of laughter as recollection came back to him.

"Gee! That's a good one," he nodded at his glass, his laugh subsiding to a chuckle. "Rawhide! And Roddy don't reckon rawhide's worth two cents these days."

"That so?"

Grant flashed a narrowed grey glance across the table. "How's that?" he asked a moment later.

But Benny was not to be drawn.

"Just argument," he demurred. "Roddy's a whale on argument if he don't use his fool head thinking. Just said it belonged to other days."

Benny drank. Then he sighed. And his chuckle passed.

"But they were good days, Gran, eh? Swell days. I'd like to say rawhide held a world to order like no arsenal of alcohol shootin' guns can ever hope to. But there it is. The kids have got it. An' seeing some of the few that'll be left 'll need to be the older folk some day they got to have it their own way, I guess. Looks to me we haven't gotta be late abed though, Gran. It's a hell of an early start for Calford to-morrow in a spring wagon with Seeds itchin' to see the show those two make of 'emselves. Can we do the three of 'em?"

"I'd guess so."

Grant replenished his glass. Drank. Then he swayed back in his rocker with his thoughtful gaze on the softly moon-lit distance of the valley. Benny attended to his glass. He set an empty bottle aside.

"That's one, anyway," he sighed.

Grant bestirred for prolonged speech. He removed his pipe while Benny lit one of his friend's big cigars.

"Say, Benny." It rumbled. "That colt. Kind of wonder

hoss. Put over that hill trip like a good one. Don't guess there's another in the world could have made it that way in time to stop you thinking with—your head. A swell colt your Coppermine, Benny."

Benny's eyes snapped behind his cigar.

"He's not mine," he denied acidly. "Roddy's handed him a wedding gift to your gal."

Grant's grey eyes twinkled round at the other.

"That so?" he drawled in a manner that made Benny fling up his hands with a laugh.

"You lick me, Gran," he cried. "The way you do it. Gee! That boy of mine? Was it him said?" he asked shrewdly.

Grant's head moved negatively while he continued to smile.

"Open another one," he said, and pointed to the bottles.

There was a silent moment while Benny produced a heavy knife and deftly removed the corked neck of one of the two remaining bottles. Then an eye cocked as he set the bottle ready to Grant's hand.

"Talking likker," he grinned. "I been gettin' it they're stark bughouse talking about having prohibition across where I come from. I had to think it while we were fixing the beasts down at your corrals this morning, with the sun hot, and the dust as thick as a desert sand storm. Can you beat it, Gran? Prohibition! Think of it, man! Dry! Bone dry! The whole blame country! God's own United States where we live free because they tell us so in New York's harbour. No smooth likker! Not a drop! Just plain cold water, like we're all fishes. 'Tain't no use, Gran. I'll need to naturalize quick. I got to get British, or Canadian, or something. Bone dry! Hell!"

Benny sat back. Gloomed into the night. Drank.

Grant rocked. Considered in silence. Drank.

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